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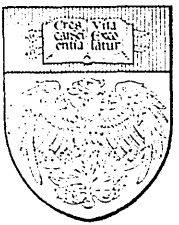

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BALAAM

AN EXPOSITION AND A STUDY

BY

SAMUEL COX, D.D.

AUTHOR OF "A COMMENTARY ON JOB," "SALVATOR MUNDI," ETC.

"*I have not flattered him, but took him to life as well as I could, sitting so far off, and having no better light.*"—LORD BACON.

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PREFACE.

In preparing for this "Study" I carefully re-perused all that had been written on its theme by the great scholars and thinkers for whom the imposing but enigmatical figure of the Chaldean Prophet has possessed a singular fascination, from Bishop Butler down to Cardinal Newman. Whatever I felt to be most helpful and suggestive,—and I found my most valuable aids in the sermons of Butler, F. D. Maurice, and F. W. Robertson,—I have woven, with due acknowledgment, into my own work. And hence I would fain hope that this little book will be found useful to those who wish to acquaint themselves with the best that has been thought and written on a confessedly difficult problem.

Of my own solution of that problem I must leave my readers to judge for themselves. But I may be permitted to say that the substance of this volume has already appeared in the pages of *The Expositor*—

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re-appearing here with only a few corrections and some slight additions; and that in this earlier shape it gained a favourable and generous verdict from the leading critical journals, and won the general approval of many of our most eminent Biblical scholars, among whom were three or four of our most learned Hebraists. Encouraged by these tokens of favour, I now venture to reproduce it in this separate and compendious form.

S. COX.

NOTTINGHAM.

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BALAAM.

"A man of two minds, he is unstable in all his ways."

INTRODUCTION.

EVEN in the noble portrait-gallery of the Old Testament there are few figures more striking, more impressive, or more perplexing than that of Balaam. A heathen, not a Hebrew, and yet elected for special distinction in the service of God; a diviner, seeking omens and auguries and interpreting them after the approved methods of the ancient East, and yet a prophet who heard the words of God and saw visions from the Almighty with opened eyes; a soothsayer, affecting to foretell and even to control human destinies, and yet a seer familiar with the ecstasies of the prophetic trance, and to whom the inspiration of the Almighty gave understanding of things to be; a man of God who, in the face of all threatening and allurement, professed that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord his God, "to do a small thing or a great," and who, in the teeth of his own most clamor-

ous interests and desires, did consistently "speak the word that the Lord put into his mouth," and yet a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord, and who by his vile counsel to the daughters of Midian cursed Israel far more effectually than by any spell he could have cast upon them; a sage before whose mind there floated the loftiest moral ideal which has ever blessed the eyes of man, and to whom both the life and the death of the righteous were infinitely desirable, and yet a "fool" who "loved the wages of unrighteousness" even more than righteousness itself: here, surely, was a man whose character it is by no means easy to decipher and harmonize, a man of qualities and impulses so contradictory and opposed that, to most of us, he remains an enigma to this day.

Many have attempted to solve, and one or two have gone far toward solving, this enigma. Bishop Butler, Dr Arnold, Cardinal Newman, F. D. Maurice, Robertson (of Brighton), Dean Stanley, with many more, have been attracted by it; but while they have all contributed something to our knowledge of the man, and two of them, Butler and Maurice, have contributed all, or nearly all, of which their respective methods of inquiry would admit, it is still open, even to far inferior men, by employing new methods, or even by using old methods more rigorously, to arrive

at a truer solution of the problem, a more adequate conception of this great but most unhappy Prophet.

And there are two methods of inquiry, I think, which may still be used with some hope. Up to this time no English scholar has, so far as I know, collected together *all* the Scriptures which relate to Balaam—Scriptures much more numerous than is commonly supposed—and studied them in the light of the new modern learning; though, obviously, this is the only method by which all the facts of the case can be recovered and ranked in their due order and importance, and the problem we have to solve can be fairly stated or re-stated. And, again, I have never yet seen what may be called the *comparative* method deliberately applied to the history and character of Balaam; that is to say, I have never seen him fairly placed alongside of other faulty or even guilty prophets, men such as Jacob, Saul, Solomon, Jonah, Caiaphas, etc., who, though they too were at times moved by the Holy Ghost, nevertheless fell under the dominion of divers lusts as degrading, if not as fatal, as those by which he was carried away captive; while yet, it will be admitted, that if we can only *classify* Balaam, and read the problem of his character in the light of that of men of his own type, this of itself will carry us far toward the solution of which we are in search, or will, at lowest, relieve the problem of many of its difficulties.

These two methods, therefore, I propose to apply. By a careful study of all that Holy Scripture records of him, I hope we may get the facts of the case, the quantities of the problem, more clearly stated; while by running a comparison between him and other inspired men of a similar type, I trust we may find that the problem is a much more common one than we have been wont to suppose, that his case, which has been assumed to be without a parallel, is not so unique, and therefore not so difficult and perplexing, as it seems: even though, after all is done, we should have to confess of Balaam, as Schlegel of Hamlet, that he is an enigma, "resembling those irrational equations in which a fraction of unknown magnitude always remains that will admit of no solution."

Pope called Lord Bacon—

"The wisest, brightest, *meanest* of mankind."

Few epigrams are more brilliant, or more unjust. But though Bacon was wronged by it, there have been men who have, in some measure, deserved it; men far wiser than their fellows, raised high above them by a splendid dowry of the gifts which the world most admires, but who have nevertheless abused their gifts to their own shame, and to the lasting injury of all who loved and trusted them. And among these rare and gifted men, who once shone with a lustre so brilliant

and attractive, but have long since sunk into the darkness of reprobation and pity and contempt, "lost to name and fame and use," we shall, I suspect, be led to rank this great, bright, but mean Prophet of Pethor.

Now of course, in urging this inquiry, our first question must be: What are the historical documents, the authorities, at our command; and what are they worth?

The first, and by far the fullest, historical document at our disposal is that which, for the sake of brevity and distinction, we may call *The Chronicle of Balaam* inserted in the Book of Numbers. Every reader of that Book must have observed that in Chapters xxii. 2—xxiv. 25 we have an episode complete in itself; and all the modern critics who have studied this Scripture concur, I believe, in the conclusion that, in this place, the Author or Compiler of the Book has inserted one of those ancient, detached or detachable, documents of which we find so many in the Pentateuch.

Where and how he got it, is a question not easy to answer, if indeed answer be possible. But, from the comparatively favourable light in which the Chronicle presents the facts of Balaam's story, most of our better scholars conclude that in some way he derived it from

Balaam himself. Hengstenberg, who has devoted much labour to the illustration of the Chronicle, goes so far, indeed, as to assume that, on his dismissal by the King of Moab, Balaam betook himself to the camp of Israel, and told the chosen people how he had been constrained to bless them again and again, in the hope that they would welcome and reward him; and that, on meeting with but a cold reception, he went over to the Midianite camp, and so fell with the chiefs of Midian when they made war upon Israel. But this is pure assumption, without a single recorded fact to support it. And, therefore, I venture to offer a speculation of my own which has at least some recorded facts to go upon.

We are told (Numbers xxxi. 8) that, together with five Midianite chiefs, Balaam was taken prisoner by the Israelites, and put to "a judicial death" after the battle had been fought and won.[1] A judicial death implies some sort of trial. And what more natural than that Balaam should plead in his defence the inspirations he had received from Jehovah, and the long series of blessings he had pronounced on Israel when all his interests, and perhaps also all his inclinations, prompted him to curse them? Such

[1] So the best critics read the Verse, understanding by "Balaam they slew *with the sword*," the sword *of justice*, since the battle was over when he was slain.

defences, in the East, were commonly autobiographical. Even St Paul, when called upon to plead before kings and governors, invariably told the story of his life as his best vindication.[1] And if Balaam, called upon to plead before Moses and the elders, told the story we now read in his Chronicle — what a scene was there? What a revelation his words would convey to the leaders of Israel of the kindness of God their Saviour, of the scale on which his providence works, and of the mystery in which it is wrapped to mortal eyes! So, then, God had been working for them in the mountains of Moab, and in the heart of this great diviner from the East, and they knew it not! Knew it not? nay, perhaps were full of fear and distrust, doubting whether even He Himself were able to deliver them from the perils by which they were encompassed! As Balaam unfolded his tale, how their hearts must have burned within them—burned with shame as well as with thankfulness—when they heard of interposition after interposition on their behalf of which up till now they had been ignorant, and for which at the time perchance they had not ventured to hope!

Balaam may well have thought that such a story as this would plead for him more effectually than any other defence he could make. And, no doubt, it did

[1] Cf. Acts xxii. 1-21; xxvi. 1-23.

plead for him; for we all know that it is when our hearts have been touched by some unexpected mercy that they are most easily moved to pity and forgiveness: it might even have won him absolution but for that damning sin of which nothing is said here—the infamous counsel he gave to the daughters of Midian which had deprived Israel of four and twenty thousand of its most serviceable and precious lives.[1] Even with that crime full in their memories, it must have cost Moses and the elders much, one thinks, to condemn to death the man who had told them such a story as this.

On no other hypothesis can we so reasonably explain, I think, how Israel became possessed of the story recorded in the Chronicle of Balaam. But, however they got it, there can be no doubt that it shews us Balaam on his best side, in the noblest posture of his soul; and that, had we nothing but this Chronicle to go upon, we should have formed a far higher conception and have pronounced a far more favourable verdict on him than we are able to do.

For while even the Chronicle contains some hints of human imperfection and weakness, the other Old Testament Scriptures which refer to him clearly reveal those baser elements in his character which, blending with his noble qualities and gifts, have made him a

[1] Numbers xxxi. 16; xxv. 9.

standing puzzle to mankind. There is, indeed, one passage outside the Chronicle which, so far from lowering, raises him in our thoughts, viz., Micah vi. 5-8; for here a moral ideal is attributed to him than which even the Christian ideal itself is hardly more lofty and sublime. But most of these Old Testament Scriptures paint him in dark and sinister lines; while the New Testament speaks of him with an absolute and passionate reprobation which fairly astonishes us, so unlike is it to its usual gentleness, until we remember that the higher and more splendid a man's gifts the lower he falls and the baser he becomes if he should pervert his gifts to selfish and sinister ends. It is from these outside Scriptures we learn that Balaam *wanted* to curse the people he was compelled to bless (Deut. xxiii. 5; Josh. xxiv. 10; Neh. xiii. 2); that it was by his counsel that the daughters of Midian were sent to tempt the men of Israel into the licentious orgies by which Baal and Astarte were worshipped, and so betrayed them to the anger of God (Num. xxxi. 16); and that, much as he loved righteousness, he loved the wages of unrighteousness still more (2 Pet. ii. 15, 16; Jude 11). And thus these Scriptures throw back a lurid light on the Chronicle itself, and compel us to read it with other and severer eyes.

Against this compulsion, however, we must be on

our guard, lest it should carry us too far. Dark as is the shadow cast on the character of Balaam by these passages in Numbers, in Deuteronomy, in Joshua, in Nehemiah, in Peter and in Jude, we have no right to put the worst construction on every act recorded in the Chronicle, or to fit all Balaam's innocent or laudable actions with evil motives. It is not by making him out all bad, or all good, that we shall solve our problem, though this is how too many have tried to reach a solution. It is the mixture of good and bad in the man which constitutes the problem, which makes him so interesting to us, and so perplexing. And, again and again, in reading the commentaries on this Chronicle, one has to remind one's-self that to cut a knot is not to untie it, and that to strike out all the difficult terms of a problem is not to solve it.

Thus, for instance, some of the most orthodox commentators simplify their task, cut their knot, by reading the basest inuendoes into the sacred narrative, and wresting every incident of the story to Balaam's disadvantage. He can do nothing, and say nothing, which they do not turn against him, so thickly do motes of prejudice and suspicion float through the eyes with which they view him. Starting with the conviction that he was an unredeemed villain and impostor, they find confirmation strong as Holy Writ

of that absurd assumption in trifles light as air. When, for example, they read that Balaam begged Balak's messengers to lodge with him a night, in order that he might consult God before he gave them their reply, they find in this natural and religious action only "a show of sanctity," assumed to "enhance his own importance." In God's question to him, "Who are these men that are with thee?" they hear a stern rebuke of his disloyalty in not having at once sent them back to their master with a peremptory refusal of his request. When Balaam refuses to go with them and to curse Israel, they cry out upon him for not giving them *the whole* of God's command to him: God had said, "Thou shalt not curse them, *for they are blessed;*" but Balaam says nothing of this "for they are blessed," wilfully suppressing words he did not want them to hear. Nay, more: so persuaded are these commentators of the unqualified villany of the man as to maintain that he only refused Balak's first advance "in order to make better terms for himself" and to secure a larger reward. The four misconstructions just cited are forced on only three verses of the Chronicle; and similar misconstructions, quite as malicious and perverse, are forced on it on pretty much the same scale throughout. And it is curious to observe that the critics who pursue Balaam with this microscopic and unrelenting malignity are

the very men who are most resolved to find Messianic predictions in the oracles he uttered, and are most sure that to him it was given to see the day of Christ afar off!

No study of Scripture pursued in this carping and censorious spirit, and working by a method so irrational and unjust, can possibly conduct us to sound and honest conclusions. Nor will any orthodoxy of creed, or devoutness of intention, exonerate those who handle the Word of God so ungenerously and deceitfully. A lie is not less, but a thousandfold more, a lie when men "lie for God," when they think to please the Lord and Lover of truth by wresting the truth in his behalf. And we should never forget, though we are all too apt to forget, that we are no less strictly bound by the laws of justice and charity in forming and uttering our verdicts of those who are long since dead than in speaking of the living; nay, that to libel the dead is a meaner and a more cowardly sin than to libel the living, since the dead are no longer with us to speak on their own behalf. As there are few things more foolish, so also there are few more wicked, than an attempt to vindicate the ways of God by hard and undeserved censures on the characters of men, whether they be still with us or have gone before.

But if we need to be on our guard against the

tendency and fault of certain (so called) orthodox commentators, we must also be on our guard against the tendency and fault of certain rationalistic commentators; for these, too, cut the knot instead of untying it, and that in the most irrational and unblushing way. As I have given a specimen of the injustice of the one school, it is but fair that I should also give a specimen of the unreasonableness of the other. Dr Kalisch, then, who is justly severe on a fault to which he himself is not prone, has written a considerable volume on the story of Balaam, of the scholarship and erudition of which it would be difficult to speak in terms too high. And this is how he deals with it. The Scriptures outside the Chronicle of Balaam paint him, for the most part, in far darker colours than the Chronicle itself. We must therefore assume that these Scriptures follow a different and wholly untrustworthy tradition, and drop them quietly out of the account. Nay, when we examine the Chronicle itself, we discover in it one long episode—that which describes how the anger of the Lord was kindled against Balaam for taking the very journey He had bidden him take, and how "the dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, forbad the madness of the prophet" —which is evidently inconsistent with the general tenour of the narrative; this, too, therefore, we must cut out as a later and misleading "interpolation,"

"an unwarranted addition" to the Chronicle. But even yet there is a single word in the Chronicle—in the Verse (Num. xxiv. 1) which affirms that Balaam was wont to search for "enchantments" or "auguries" —which clashes with the general tone of the narrative; and this, though there is no diplomatic ground for suspecting it, but simply because it is "a single and isolated expression strikingly at variance with the tenour and spirit of the entire composition," we must replace by another word, and assume that what he went to seek was "inspirations," not "auguries." Having thus cut and carved the Narrative to our mind, we shall have no hesitation in concluding that Balaam was a prophet of the purest and noblest type, without a stain on his character or a questionable incident in his career. "Firm and inexorable like eternal Fate, he regards himself solely as an instrument of that Omnipotence which guides the destinies of nations by its unerring wisdom. Free from all human passion, and almost from all human emotion, he is like a mysterious spirit from a higher and nobler world, which looks upon the fortunes of the children of men with an immovable and sublime repose." [1]

Thus Rationalism, with an unconscious but egregious irrationality which is its almost constant

[1] Bible Studies. Part I. The Prophecies of Balaam. By Dr Kalisch, p. 11.

Nemesis, affects to solve the problem by calmly wiping it off the slate, and presents us with a faultless monster in place of a man of like passions with ourselves.

Not thus, but by accepting all that the Bible, both in and outside the Chronicle, has to tell us concerning him, and by patiently studying these scriptures till light arises in the darkness, shall we come to know Balaam as he was, and learn the true lessons of his life.

PART I.

THE CHRONICLE OF BALAAM.

NUMBERS xxii. 2—xxiv. 25.

INTRODUCTION.—Chapter xxii. 2. Now Balak, the son of Zippor, saw all that Israel had done unto the Amorites.

3. And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they were so many; and Moab loathed the children of Israel.

4. And Moab said unto the elders of Midian, Now shall this host lick up all that is round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field. And Balak, the son of Zippor, was king of Moab at that time.

FIRST EMBASSY.—5. He sent messengers therefore unto Balaam, the son of Beor, to Pethor, which is by the river, to the land of the children of his people, to call him, saying: Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt; behold, they cover the face of the earth, and they abide over against us.

6. Come now therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people; for they are too mighty for me. Peradventure I shall prevail that we may smite them, and that I may drive them out of the land; for I know that he whom thou blessest is blessed, and he whom thou cursest is cursed.

7. And the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the rewards of divination in their hand; and they came unto Balaam and spoke unto him the words of Balak.

8. And he said unto them, Lodge here this night, and I will bring you word as the Lord shall speak unto me. And the princes of Moab remained with Balaam.

9. And God came unto Balaam, and said, Who are these men that are with thee?

10. And Balaam said unto God, Balak, the son of Zippor, hath sent unto me, saying:

11. Behold, there is a people come out from Egypt which covereth the face of the earth; come now, curse me them: peradventure I shall be able to fight against them, and drive them out.

12. And God said unto Balaam, Thou shalt not go with them: thou shalt not curse this people: for they are blessed.

13. And Balaam rose up in the morning, and said unto the princes of Balak, Get you into your land; for the Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you.

14. And the princes of Moab rose up, and they went unto Balak, and said, Balaam refuseth to come with us.

SECOND EMBASSY.—15. And Balak sent yet again princes more and more honourable than they.

16. And they came to Balaam, and said to him, Thus saith Balak, the son of Zippor, Let nothing, I pray thee, hinder thee from coming unto me;

17. For I will promote thee unto very great honour, and I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me. Come, therefore, I pray thee, curse me this people.

18. And Balaam answered and said unto the servants of Balak: If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do a small thing or a great.

19. Now therefore, I pray you, tarry ye also here this night, that I may know what the Lord will say unto me more.

20. And God came unto Balaam at night, and said unto him: If the men are come to call thee, rise up and go with them: but only that which I shall tell thee, that shalt thou do.

21. And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab.

THE JOURNEY.—22. And God's anger was kindled against him as he was going; and the angel of the Lord placed himself in

the way to withstand him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him.

23. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his sword drawn in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the way and went into the field; and Balaam smote his ass, to turn her into the way.

24. Then the angel of the Lord stood in a hollow between vineyards, a wall being on this side and a wall on that side.

25. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord, and she pressed herself against the wall, and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall: and he smote her again.

26. Then the angel of the Lord went further on, and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn either to the right hand or to the left.

27. And the ass saw the angel of the Lord, and she fell down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with his staff.

28. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said to Balaam: What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?

29. And Balaam said unto the ass, Thou hast played me false: if there were a sword in my hand, verily I would have killed thee.

30. And the ass said unto Balaam, Am I not thine ass which thou hast ridden from the first unto this day? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee? And he said, Nay.

31. Then the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed down and fell on his face.

32. And the angel of the Lord said unto him, Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? Behold, it was I who came forth to withstand thee, because thy journey is foolhardy in my sight;

33. And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times. Unless she had turned from me, verily I should now have killed thee and saved her alive.

34. And Balaam said unto the angel of the Lord, I have sinned, for I knew not that thou wast standing in the way against me: now, therefore, if it displease thee, I will get me back again.

35. And the angel of the Lord said unto Balaam, Go with the men; but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that shalt thou speak. So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

ARRIVAL AND RECEPTION.—36. And when Balak heard that Balaam was come, he went out to meet him unto Ir-Moab, which is on the border of the Arnon, even at the utmost boundary.

37. And Balak said unto Balaam, Did not I urgently send unto thee to call thee? Wherefore didst thou not come unto me? Am I not able forsooth to promote thee to honour?

38. And Balaam said unto Balak, Behold, I am come unto thee. Have I now any power at all to say anything? The word that God shall put into my mouth, that shall I speak.

39. And Balaam went with Balak, and they came unto Kirjath-huzzoth.

40. And Balak killed oxen and sheep, and sent thereof to Balaam, and to the princes that were with him.

FIRST ORACLE.—41. And on the morrow, in the morning, Balak took Balaam, and brought him up to Bamoth-Baal, that thence he might see the outskirt of the camp.

Chapter xxiii. 1. And Balaam said unto Balak, Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams.

2. And Balak did as Balaam had spoken; and Balak and Balaam offered on each of the altars a bullock and a ram.

3. And Balaam said unto Balak, Stand thou by thy burnt-offering, and I will go: peradventure the Lord will come to meet me; and the word that he shall shew me, I will tell thee. And he went away to a scaur.

4. And God met Balaam, and he said to him, I have prepared the seven altars, and I have offered on every altar a bullock and a ram.

5. And the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, Return unto Balak, and thus shalt thou speak.

6. And he returned unto him, and, lo, he was standing by his burnt-offering, he and all the princes of Moab.

7. And he took up his parable and said :

From Aram hath Balak brought me,
The King of Moab from the mountains of the East,
(Saying) Come, curse me Jacob,
And, come, ban Israel !

8. How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed,
Or how shall I ban whom the Lord hath not banned ?

9. For from the summit of the rocks I see them,
And I behold them from the hills :
Lo, it is a people that dwelleth apart,
And is not reckoned among the nations.

10. Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Or number the fourth part of Israel ?
Let me die the death of the righteous,
And be my last estate like his.

11. And Balak said unto Balaam, What hast thou done unto me ? I took thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them.

12. And he answered and said, Must I not take heed to speak that which the Lord putteth into my mouth ?

Second Oracle.—13. And Balak said unto him, Come, I pray thee, with me unto another place where thou mayest see them —only the outskirt of them shalt thou see, and shalt not see them all—and curse me them from thence.

14. And he brought him to the Field of the Seers, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered a bullock and a ram on each of the altars.

15. And he said unto Balak, Stand thou, as before, by thy burnt-offering, while I go to meet [the Lord] as before.

16. And the Lord met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, Go back to Balak, and speak thus.

17. And when he came to him, behold, he was standing by his burnt-offering, and the princes of Moab with him. And Balak said unto him, What hath the Lord spoken?

18. And he took up his parable, and said:

Arise, Balak, and hear:
Hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor!
19. God is not a man that he should lie,
Nor a son of man that he should repent.
Hath he said, and shall he not do it,
Or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?
20. Behold, I have been charged to bless;
And if he blesseth, I cannot reverse it.
21. No iniquity is to be descried in Jacob,
No distress to be seen in Israel:
The Lord their God is with them,
And the trumpet-sound of their King among them.
22. God brought them forth from Egypt;
They have the bison's strength.
23. For there is no augury in Jacob,
Nor any divination in Israel;
But in due time it is told to Jacob,
And to Israel, what God doeth.
24. Behold, they are a people that rise up like a lioness,
And lift themselves up as a lion;
They lie not down till they eat their prey
And drink the blood of the slain.

25. And Balak said unto Balaam, Thou shalt never curse them again, nor bless them again.

26. But Balaam answered and said unto Balak, Did I not tell thee, saying, All that the Lord speaketh, that must I do.

THIRD ORACLE.—27. And Balak said unto Balaam, Come, I pray thee, I will bring thee unto another place; peradventure it may please God that thou shouldest curse me them from thence.

28. And Balak brought Balaam unto the top of Peor, that looketh over the Waste.

29. And Balaam said unto Balak, Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven bullocks and seven rams.

30. And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bullock and a ram on each of the altars.

Chapter xxiv. 1. And when Balaam saw that it pleased the Lord to bless Israel, he went not, as at the other times, to seek for auguries, but he set his face toward the Waste.

2. And Balaam lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came upon him.

3. And he took up his parable and said:

Thus sayeth Balaam, the son of Beor,
And thus sayeth the man whose eyes are open;
4. Thus sayeth he who heareth the words of God,
He who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with opened eyes:
5. How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob,
Thy tabernacles, O Israel!
6. As valleys that are spread out,
As gardens by the river's side,
As aloes which the Lord hath planted,
As cedars beside the waters!
7. Water shall stream from his buckets,
And his seed be by many waters;
And his king shall be higher than Agag,
And his kingdom shall be exalted.
8. God brought him forth out of Egypt:
He hath the bison's strength:
He shall eat up the nations that are round about him
And shall suck their bones,
And break their loins in pieces.
9. He croucheth, he lieth down like a lion,
And like a lioness, who shall rouse him up?
Blessed are they that bless thee,
And cursed are they that curse thee.

10. And Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he smote his hands together; and Balak said unto Balaam, I

called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times.

11. Therefore, now, haste thee to thy place. I thought to promote thee to great honour; but, lo, the Lord hath kept thee back from honour.

12. And Balaam said unto Balak, Did I not also speak unto thy messengers whom thou sentest unto me, saying,

13. If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go against the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak.

14. And, now, behold, I go unto my people. Come, I will advise thee what this people shall do unto thy people in later days.

FOURTH ORACLE.—15. And he took up his parable, and said:

Thus sayeth Balaam, the son of Beor,
And thus saith the man whose eyes are open:
16. Thus sayeth he who heareth the words of God,
And knoweth the knowledge of the Most High;
He who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with opened eyes:
17. I see him, though he be not now;
I behold him, though he be not nigh:
There cometh a star out of Jacob,
And out of Israel there riseth a sceptre,
And smiteth in pieces both flanks of Moab,
And shattereth all the sons of tumult:
18. And Edom is his possession,
And Seir, his enemies, is his possession,
And Israel shall do valiantly;
19. Jacob shall have dominion over them,
And shall destroy them that escape out of their cities.

20. And when he looked on Amalek, he took up his parable and said:—

Amalek is the first of the nations,
But his end shall be destruction.

21. And he looked on the Kenites, and took up his parable, and said :

Strong is thy dwelling-place,
And thy nest fixed in the crags ;
22. For surely Kain shall not be destroyed
Until Asshur shall carry thee away captive.
23. And he took up his parable, and said :
Alas ! who shall live when God doeth this !
24. But ships shall come from the coast of Chittim,
And shall humble Asshur and humble Eber :—
And *he* also shall be destroyed.

25. And Balaam rose up, and went away, and turned toward his place ; and Balak also went his way.

§ 1. The Invitation (Numbers xxii. 2-21).

When the Children of Israel, purged from the worst taints of slavery by their long sojourn in the pure air of the Desert, and in some measure trained to habits of order, freedom, and courage by the hardships and adventures of the way, drew near to the borders of the Promised Land, they were encountered by the Amorites, the great fighting clan of the highlands of Canaan and of its borders, under the renowned warrior-chiefs Sihon of Heshbon and Og of Bashan. It was a critical and a perilous moment; for, with this fighting clan once conquered and swept out of the way, there was none left who could successfully oppose their entrance into the goodly land; while, had they suffered defeat, the whole Arab race would probably have flung themselves upon them and hunted them down in the Wilderness. Happily for them, and for us, their victory was immediate and decisive; and, the Amorites being utterly broken and subdued, their road lay open before them, with none to make them afraid.

But though, and because, there was none to bar the way by force of arms, the fear of them fell on neighbouring clans, and two of these, taking counsel of

their fears, consulted together how, since force was of no avail, they might betray and undo them by fraud. These two were the Midianites, a peaceful nomadic clan, whose caravans travelled and traded throughout the East; and the Moabites, a settled and organized clan, whose pastures were alive with cattle, and whose cities were rich in the arts and luxuries of the ancient civilization. To the King and princes of Moab the sheikhs of Midian suggested an expedient which, however strange it may seem to us, instantly commended itself to these statesmen of the antique world, and would commend itself to many of their descendants to this day. They agreed to "hire a wise man" to *curse* the Children of Israel, never doubting that he could lay a spell upon them under which their strength and valour would wither away.

Now the Midianites in their long journeys, journeys which often extended to the Euphrates and even beyond it, had heard of a man so wise, and whose words were so potent, that none could withstand him. A prophet, and the son of a prophet, he was called Balaam, the son of Beor; that is—for men are always most attracted and impressed by the darker side of the prophetic character—he was known as *the Destroyer*, the son of *the Burner*. At the present moment he was head of the Prophetic College of Pethor, on the Euphrates, where men from many lands

gathered to study under him the arts of divination and enchantment. But, doubtless, if so great and opulent a prince as Balak were to send a suitable embassy to him, with "the rewards of divination" in their hands, he would come and curse the enemies whom both Moab and Midian had so much cause to dread.

This, as we gather from the Chronicle, was how *they* regarded Balaam; and it was on this report of him that Balak resolved to send for him. But how are *we* to regard him? That he was a Soothsayer we must admit, for by this name he is expressly described to us (Josh. xiii. 22); and therefore we must admit that he was largely dependent for his knowledge on omens and the auguries he drew from them; we must admit that he was versed in the arts of astrology and divination, and bears a suspicious resemblance to the augurs of Rome, to the "prophets" of the Homeric poems and the Athenian tragedies, and even to the astrologers, sorcerers, diviners, the wise men or magi of Egypt, Chaldea, and Persia. In the words of F. D. Maurice, "He is evidently supposed to have that knowledge of things past, present, and future which is ascribed to Calchas," for example, "and which gave him his high repute with the Grecian fleet. He is appealed to just as that seer was appealed to when a pestilence was raging in the camp or when the ships were weather-bound; just as

Tiresias was sent for to explain the calamity which had befallen Thebes, and to clear up the mystery which overhung the house of Œdipus." He falls into trances, he forecasts the future, he gives advice, he utters oracles, he takes rewards, just as they did, and wraps himself in the very cloud of mysterious and lofty pretension which they were apt to wear. The Bible is not even at the pains to delineate him as an exceptionally favourable specimen of his class, but, on the contrary, represents him as eager to win Balak's favour by fulfilling his wishes, and even as ultimately fulfilling them far more effectually than by a formal curse.

Hence it is, I suppose, that the more orthodox critics—Keil, to wit—beg us to observe that, in the Hebrew, Balaam is never called a prophet (*nabi*), or a seer (*chozeh*), but only a soothsayer or diviner (*ha-cozim*), a title never applied to any true prophet; forgetting, apparently, that a still higher authority, the New Testament, expressly calls Balaam a prophet, although in the same breath it rebukes "the madness of the prophet." Hence, too, it is that, in the vulgar mind at least, Balaam has been set down, generation after generation, as a vulgar impostor whose inspiration came from beneath, not from above; or, at best, as an ambitious and crafty schemer who, to enhance his own importance and give weight to his counsels, threw the conclusions at which he arrived by reflection, ex-

perience, and political sagacity into an oracular form, and heightened his figure as a statesman, or a sage, by mounting the tripod of the prophet.

But the Bible lends no countenance to this singular theory. It does not ascribe his inspiration to an evil spirit, or treat him as one pretending to powers which he did not possess. It acknowledges his insight and his foresight to be real and true. It grants him his prophetic trances, confesses that he saw visions and dreamed dreams, affirms that God spake to him face to face as a man speaketh with his friend; it even asserts that at times "the Spirit of God came upon him" (Num. xxiv. 2) with such overmastering force that, raised out of "the ignorant present," he beheld things which were to come to pass centuries after he should have left this earthly scene: nay, it even depicts him as lifting himself to the loftiest of prophetic functions, and holding forth an ideal of righteousness than which none is more simple, noble, and complete.

No, the Bible denies him no honour; it lavishes on him all the signs and credentials of the true prophet, down even to contumely and rejection, while yet it brands him as false to his prophetic vocation. For great as it seems to us, the Bible holds it a very small thing to be a mere prophet, to be able to foresee and to foretell things to come, or even to conceive and admire an ideal of righteousness which does not mould

and inform the life. *This* was the real blot on Balaam's character; it was here that he fell from his high vocation; and it is here that we must find the difference between the false prophet and the true. We must, in short, judge him, as we judge every man, not by his gifts, but by the use he made of them. He was royally endowed. He could detect the germs of the future in the present and the past. He could discern and admire the true ideal of human life. His predictions were fulfilled. The experience of subsequent ages has confirmed his moral insight. But to what end did he foresee the Star that was to come out of Jacob and the Sceptre that was to rise in Israel, if he would not walk in the light of that Star or submit to the rule of that Sceptre? To what end did he admire and covet Righteousness if, not content with bowing his own lofty spirit under the yoke of unrighteousness, he could stoop to betray men in whom God "saw no iniquity" into a crime so foul that it could only be washed out in their blood?

With this conception of Balaam in our minds, this hypothetical solution of our problem—thinking of him as at once a great prophet and a false prophet; great in gifts but false in the use he made of them—we can at least read his history in a just and generous spirit. We need deny him no gift, nor grudge him any good act or word. It is his very greatness which

makes him so little, his very goodness which makes him so bad. Moab and Midian saw in him nothing more than a diviner, a wizard, who could shape as well as forecast the future, who could control the events he foresaw; but we may see in him a man on whom Jehovah conferred many choice inspirations and gifts, whom He loved and tried to save,—just as Jesus loved the Young Man in the Gospels, and tried to save him, though he too loved riches and fell into a snare.

Conceiving of him simply as a great wizard, the king of Moab sent twice across the whole breadth of the Assyrian desert to secure the services of this master of potent spells; for Balaam's home was beyond the Euphrates, among the mountains where the vast streams of Mesopotamia take their rise, and whence Abraham had long before come out, not knowing whither he went. His first messengers arrive, we are told, "with the rewards of divination in their hands,"—a phrase from which many bitter waters of aspersion have been drawn. Simply because they brought these rewards with them, it has been inferred that Balaam hankered after them, although those who drew that inference must surely have known both that, in the East, to enter the presence of any distinguished person without a *nuzzur*, or present, is simply to insult him, and that

Oriental custom and courtesy ordained that no one should consult a seer without carrying him an appropriate offering. Assuredly it is not the fault of the Bible if they did not know this; for, in that charming idyllic story of Saul seeking for his father's asses and finding a kingdom, we read (1 Sam. ix. 7, 8) that, when Saul's servant advised him to consult the Seer who might peradventure shew them the way they ought to take, Saul replied: "But if we go, what shall we bring the man? what have we?" and could not be persuaded to listen to the advice until his servant produced "the fourth part of a shekel" from his pouch. And yet who ever heard *Samuel* condemned as a mercenary impostor because Saul and his servant came to him "with the reward of divination in their hand"?

So, again, it can only be the effect of a prejudice, determined to see nothing good in him, that has led good and learned men to find "a mere show of sanctity" in Balaam's resolve to consult God before giving a reply to the messengers of Balak. For what should the servant of Jehovah do before engaging in any great enterprise? Would not the very critics who now condemn him for "hypocrisy," simply because he consulted God, have been the first to charge him with "presumption" if he had *not* consulted God?

"But," say they, "even if it were right that he should ask God what he was to do when Balak's first messengers came to him, how can you defend him when a second embassy, consisting of more and more honourable princes than the first, reached him, and he begs *them* to tarry with him while he consults God again? Did he not already know what the will of the Lord was? Can anything be more plain than that he wanted, if possible, to change rather than to learn the Divine will, in order that he might secure the hire and the honour which Balak had pledged himself to bestow?"

To all which we can only reply:—Very possibly all your conclusions are sound enough, but they are not warranted by the facts from which you infer them. Many of the best men are represented as taking the same question to God again and again, and you have called on us to admire them for their piety, for their steadfast and persevering faith? Why, then, are we to blame in Balaam what we are to admire in them? Why are we to condemn him because, after an interval of many weeks, during which all the conditions of the case might have changed, he took his question to God a second time in order that he might learn "what the Lord had to say unto him *more*"? Even if we grant that he wanted to change the will of God and bend it to his purpose, must we necessarily con-

demn him for that? Did not Paul "thrice" beseech the Lord to take the thorn out of his flesh? Did not Abraham six times plead with God for the Cities of the Plain, and even venture to beat down the terms of the Almighty from the fifty righteous persons whose presence within those cities was to save them from their doom to forty and five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty, to ten? And if we are to admire his boldness as "heroism," why are we to condemn that of Balaam as "an impudent irreverence"? Nay, even if Balaam *was* attracted by "the very great honour" to which Balak promised to advance him, we still run some risk of doing him a grave injustice if we assume that his only motive was a mercenary or selfish one. May not "a prophet" have felt that a noble career was open to him should he become the trusted counsellor of a Prince who had given him the pledge, "I will do whatsoever thou sayest unto me"? May he not have dreamed, as many a recluse scholar has done, of the good he might effect by leaving his studious seclusion to mingle with men, to mould their policy, purge and elevate their aims, and place before them that fair ideal of Righteousness which he had conceived? If, as we learn from Micah, he shewed Balak that God required no sacrifice or offering, but only a just, kindly, and humble heart, may we not well believe that part, and great part, of the charm of

Balak's invitation lay in the hope that he might be able to work in Moab a moral and religious reformation not inferior to that through which Israel had recently passed?

While so many innocent and laudable motives are possible, we have no right to conclude that Balaam was actuated by none but base and evil motives; the lofty stature of the man of itself renders such a construction of him improbable, unreasonable, inadequate. We are bound to judge him as we ourselves would be judged, and to give him credit for all the good we honestly can.

On the other hand, we are also bound not to ignore, or condone, what was plainly evil in the man, because we find much to admire and approve. We know from the Scriptures outside the Chronicle that Balaam did want to curse the people whom he blessed, wanted, that is, to gratify his powerful client and to secure the honours and rewards, the great and influential position, which had been dangled before him; we know also that he "loved the wages of unrighteousness" in their basest form, and cared overmuch for wealth and for the luxuries it would bring him. And if we read the first twenty verses of this Chronicle in the lurid light of these outside Scriptures, we may honestly find in them, I think, two slight hints of the presence and activity of the evil spirit

that was at work in his heart, and was fighting against the Spirit of all truth and goodness.

In Verse 13, for example, we may hear a sigh of bitter disappointment in his words to the first messengers of Balak: "Get you into your own land, for the Lord *refuseth* to give me leave to go with you." "The Lord *would not hearken* unto Balaam," we read elsewhere,[1] "but turned his curse into a blessing." And here we have a similar phrase, a phrase which leaves a similar impression on our mind. The impression is that Balaam would have liked to turn his spells against Israel, and would, if he could, have won the Divine consent to his wish. For if these simple words, "The Lord refuseth to give me leave to go with you," have in them a touch of the schoolboy denied a holiday on which he had set his heart, they are also tinged with the bitterness of a grave ambitious man who sees himself debarred from entering on a great and much desired career.

In Verse 18, as even the critics who most delight to honour Balaam are compelled to admit, there is a touch of that vile greed, that lust of riches, which seems to have been the most obvious, as it is also the most sordid, defect in his character; though even here, if we would be just, we must remember that Balaam is by no means the only distinguished

[1] Deuteronomy xxiii. 5.

personage in the religious world whom this sordid craving has marred: perhaps, indeed, there is no sin more common in the Church than this foolish "trust in riches," and no truth more commonly evaded than that which pronounces riches "a hurtful snare." When we hear him say to the second group of messengers, "If Balak would give me *his house full of silver and gold*, I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God, to do a small thing or a great," we cannot but feel that the silver and gold in Balak's house had a certain attraction for him, that the possession of wealth enters too prominently into his ideal of a perfect human life. Even Dr Kalisch himself is constrained to confess that the words imply that Balaam was "agitated by an inward struggle" which is suggested "with the subtlest psychological art," and, for a moment at least, suffered his desire for large and affluent conditions to darken his clear and unstained soul.

In this Verse, moreover, we find the first of several utterances which, for all so noble as they sound, breed a certain suspicion in us. He who here says, "I cannot go beyond the word of the Lord my God to do a small thing or a great," afterwards says to Balak, "The word that God shall put into my mouth, that (only) will I speak"; and again, "The word that He shall shew me I will tell thee"; and again, "Must I not

take heed to speak that which the Lord putteth into my mouth ?" and, again, "Did I not tell thee, saying, All that the Lord speaketh, that must I do ?" and, again, "Did I not speak unto thy messengers, saying, If Balak would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go against the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind, but what the Lord saith, that shall I speak ?" As we listen to these reiterated and vehement asseverations the exclamation rises to our lips, "Methinks the prophet doth protest too much !" while, as we observe the emphasis he lays on the implicit obedience he owes to Jehovah and intends at all costs to pay, we suspect that the temptation to disobedience was already rising within his heart, and fear that he may break down at the very point at which he brags the loudest.

As indeed he did—most sorrowfully for him, most instructively for us ; teaching us the danger of an overweening self-confidence, and that we are never in such peril from ourselves as when we are most sure of ourselves : teaching us also that neither the most splendid gifts, nor the most earnest intentions of obedience, are a sufficient guarantee of obedience. For it is not by denying that Balaam was a true and even a great prophet, nor by denying that he meant and tried to use his high prophetic gifts for noble ends, that we reach

the true lesson of his life. Any man may be, and is, a prophet who, not content with living in the outward show of things, is for ever seeking to acquaint himself with the principles, the realities, which lie behind the great spectacle of human life, ordain the lines along which it must move, and mould the forms through which it shifts. Such an one is able to see how the present has grown out of the past, and to project the present into the future and forecast the moulds into which it must inevitably run. He can trace events backward to their causes and forward to their results, and can thus, in some measure, read the whole story of time, which for most of us has no connected story to tell. He can explain us to ourselves, tell us how we became what we are, and what we must be in the years to come; he can anticipate the course which we shall take, rouse that which has fallen asleep in us, quicken in us that which is dead.[1] And he may honestly mean to use this strange power—a power which is only strange to us because we are so inobservant, so unreflecting, so preoccupied—purely for good and noble ends. But unless he does continue to use them for such ends, let him once pervert them to a selfish use, to the gratification of his own ambition, greed, fame, and forthwith his clear and mounting spirit grows dark and

[1] Cf. F. D. Maurice, The Patriarchs of Israel. Sermon on *Balaam*.

dull, his insight fails him, his prevision fails him, his noble intention fails him; he sinks into the deeper sin because it is from such a height he falls. Great gifts are a great responsibility, and may only too easily become a great shame. While, therefore, we earnestly covet the best and greatest gifts, if we learn wisdom from Balaam's fall, we shall most earnestly seek that "more excellent way," on which St Paul insists, the way of Charity: for a pure and unselfish love is not only the greatest and most excellent of all gifts; it is also the only gift which will keep all our other gifts sweet and pure.

§ 2. The Journey (Numbers xxii. 22-34).

Of Balaam's long journey from Mesopotamia to Moab only a single incident is recorded, and this, apparently, occurred as his journey drew to a close. All the graphic and local touches in the description of the road he took,—first, through the open field where the ass could turn aside, then along a path between high vineyard walls against one of which the terrified and shrinking ass crushed his foot, and then along the strait place, the narrow causeway, where there was no room to turn—indicate that he was approaching a city; for only in the environs of a city would he be likely to pass successively through cultivated fields, carefully guarded vineyards, and the raised narrow way which led up to the gate. And it has been conjectured, with much probability, that the city he was approaching was Ir-Moab, or Ar of Moab, on the eastern border of Balak's kingdom, near the spot where the Upper Arnon receives its tributary Nahaliel. One of the upper branches of this stream still bears the name *Balû*, and in this name there is very possibly a reminiscence of *Balaam*.

Only one incident of the journey is recorded, but

this incident is so singular in itself, and, in the shallower sort of mind, has assumed such undue proportions and given rise to so much sceptical and jesting comment, that it is impossible to pass it by with the few words which are all that it really deserves. That "the dumb ass, speaking with man's voice, should rebuke the madness of the prophet," is but a theme for ridicule and merriment to many; while, to many more, it presents a grave and serious difficulty any solution of which they would thankfully welcome. I myself can well remember a time when Balaam's ass was a much more perplexing figure than Balaam himself, and when I turned with disappointment from any sermon or essay on the character of this singular prophet—even the weighty and illuminating discourses of Bishop Butler and F. D. Maurice—which made no attempt to explain this incident in his story. And as there must be many who are still as immature and perplexed in thought as I then was, it may be well to treat this incident as if it were of more importance than I think it is, and to deal with it at somewhat disproportionate fulness and length.

The angel appeared, then, and the dumb ass spake "to rebuke *the madness* of the prophet." What was his madness? in what did it consist? is, therefore, the first question we ask; for if we can get at the

motive of this strange intervention, that may go far to explain the intervention itself.

Here, then, was a man of high prophetic gifts, and very proud of the gifts which raised him so high above his fellows (Chap. xxiv. 3, 4; 15, 16); a man, too, of a conscience so far quick and sensitive that he could not enter on any course without first persuading himself that he had Divine sanction for it: and he is going on an errand which he feels to be a dubious one, an errand in which he is conscious that his own wishes and interests are not in harmony with the will of God. He wants to curse the people whom God has commanded him to bless. And though he quite means, or has persuaded himself that he quite means, to obey the Divine command, he would gladly induce God to modify it; while in the darker corners of his soul, into which he does not care to pry, there lurks perhaps a hope that he may hit on some means of evading that command while seeming to obey it, without doing too much violence to his conscience. And so, as he goes on his way, he plots and broods and schemes; he bids his brains go about and devise some plan by which, while true to the letter of the Divine command, he may yet be false to its spirit.

We are doing him no injustice, I hope and think, in assuming that this was the point about which his thoughts hovered and revolved during his long journey;

for we base the assumption not simply on the course he ultimately took, but also on all the details of the strange intervention by which his thoughts and schemes were arrested at the close of the journey, and on one or two direct hints which the Chronicle yields to an attentive student. Thus, in Verse 22, we are told that "the anger of the Lord was kindled against him *as he was going;*" not "*because* he was going," as in the Authorised Version, but by something transpiring within the man as he went. Now God is not angry without cause; and the one cause which makes Him angry with men is some unrighteousness in them, or some inward leaning toward unrighteousness. And what could the unrighteous leaning of Balaam be but that, in the conflict between his own interests and desires and the will of God, he was permitting his interests and desires to prevail over his sense of duty, suffering the baser elements of his nature to override the promptings of that in him which was highest and best, giving way, in short, to the temptation which Balak had held out before him, and scheming how he might please man without altogether breaking with God?

So absorbed is he in his schemes, so preoccupied, that this man, ordinarily so alert, so quick to discern omens, so sensitive to spiritual intimations, so proud of his open eye, actually does not see the angel who

stands full in his path, with his sword drawn in his hand. So unlike himself is he that, forgetting his customary composure and moderation, he cruelly smites the ass who is saving him from destruction, and only longs that his staff had been a sword that he might slay her!

This inward preoccupation and deterioration was "the madness" which the dumb ass forbad and rebuked. And how severe and humiliating, yet how merciful, the rebuke! How humiliating that he who prided himself on being "the man whose eyes are open, who heareth the words of God and seeth the vision of the Almighty," should find himself outdone by the very beast he rode, blind to what even his ass could see; so insensate, so "transported from himself" as that he had sought to slay the very creature who had saved him! And yet what a wonder of mercy and grace was it that even while, as the angel told him, his way was rash, foolhardy, full of hidden perils which he ought never to have affronted, God had not forgotten or forsaken him, but had miraculously interposed to warn him that the course he was meditating could only lead him to destruction, to arrest him in his downward path, to quicken his attention, to open his eyes to the spiritual facts and omens of which he had lost ken, and to call him back to the allegiance he so loudly professed?

These are the thoughts naturally suggested by this incident to reflective and spiritual minds: and it will be admitted that it is somewhat depressing to be called down from such thoughts as these—thoughts which throw so much light on God's providential dealing with us and with all men—to a consideration of the mere form of the narrative and of the difficulties which it suggests to the inquiring and sceptical intellect. But since this also is a necessary part of our task, let us at once address ourselves to it and get it out of our way.

Now, of course, if we are to approach this problem in a fair and reasonable spirit, we must peremptorily banish from our minds all the sordid and ludicrous associations which, here in England, have long been connected with the ass. We have only to go as far as Spain to find a much nobler strain of this patient and useful beast; while, in all Eastern lands and from the earliest times, the ass has been as habitually ridden by the learned and dignified classes in time of peace as the horse in war. More sure of foot than the horse, of a steadier nerve, more patient of labour and distress, it is eminently suited to such lands as Syria and Mesopotamia, where stretches of burning sand alternate with lofty mountain ranges, with their difficult rocky passes and steep dangerous ascents and descents.

Then, too, if the angel of the Lord appeared, as we are told, in a visible, and probably in a human form, brandishing a drawn sword against the advancing prophet, we need find no difficulty in the fact, need betake ourselves to no theory of instinct to understand, that the ass *saw* him, and sought to avoid the peril to which both she and her master were exposed; while the Prophet himself, brooding over his schemes with downcast and introverted eyes, might very well see nothing beyond the ass on which he rode, even when his attention was partly aroused by its unwonted behaviour.

The real difficulty of the incident to those who feel a special difficulty in it consists, I suppose, in the alleged fact that the ass *spoke*, spoke in apparently human words and with a human voice. And this difficulty has, to say the least of it, been very neatly turned by many of our ablest critics and commentators, some of whom have as little love for miracles as the veriest sceptic. They say: Balaam, the soothsayer and diviner, was trained to observe and interpret the motions and cries of beasts and birds, and especially anything that was exceptional in them; to draw auguries and portents from them, to see in them the workings of a Divine power, to infer from them indications of the Divine will. When, therefore, the beast he rode shewed so strange and unwonted a

reluctance to advance; when he first "turned aside out of the way," then "crushed" Balaam's foot against a wall, and then fell down groaning in "a narrow place where there was no room to turn either to the right hand or the left," all the diviner woke in the man. Here was a portent indeed, and he must interpret it. And to him it seemed that the ass was striving and remonstrating with him; that, conscious of a presence of which he himself was unaware, it was seeking to save him from a doom which he was heedlessly provoking. And so, with the dramatic instinct of an Oriental poet, either Balaam himself or the original writer of the Chronicle *translated these subjective impressions into external facts*, and made the ass "speak" the meaning which he read in its motions and groans.

Nor is it only rationalistic critics who lean toward the interpretation which makes Balaam read the speech or rebuke into the dumb ass's inarticulate cries. It is adopted in one of the most orthodox of recent commentaries—the Speaker's Commentary, where we read: "The cries of the ass would seem to have been significant to Balaam's mind only," and not to have meant anything to the servants and the envoys who were with him; just as Saul alone heard "words" on the way to Damascus, those who journeyed with him hearing a "sound," indeed, but finding no articulate

meaning in it. "God may have brought it about that *sounds uttered by the creature after his kind became to the prophet's intelligence as though it addressed him in rational speech.* Indeed to an augur, priding himself on his skill in interpreting the cries and movements of animals, no more startling warning could be given than one so real as this, yet *conveyed through the medium of his own art;* and to a seer, pretending to superhuman wisdom, no more humiliating rebuke can be imagined than to teach him by the mouth of his own ass."

Then, too, to complete their case, those who hold this hypothesis proceed to point out to us the congruity of the speech with the supposed speaker. If, they say, the ass had had any profoundly spiritual truth put or read into its mouth, there would or might have been a marked and repulsive disproportion between the truth revealed and the medium through which it was conveyed. But no such truth is attributed to her; what she says, or is supposed to say, is wholly in keeping with her animal nature and conditions. It is simply what myriads of the animals who have been reduced to the service of man might and would have said could they have spoken with man's voice. All she does is to remonstrate against the injustice and cruelty with which she has been treated, to appeal to the fidelity of her service as a

reason why she should not be suspected of wilful disobedience. Virtually she says to her master (Verse 30): "You have smitten me these three times. You would have slain me if you could, although my only offence is that I have been trying to save you from a danger you did not see. Why have you treated me so cruelly? Have I not served you faithfully ever since I was thine? Have I ever disobeyed you before, or disobeyed you without sufficient cause? Am I wont to do so unto thee? If not, why forget my past service and fidelity? Why did you not conclude that I had good reason for disobeying you now?"

Certainly, if an ass could speak, she could hardly speak more appropriately. She is simply speaking for the whole animal race, and once for all protests against and rebukes the madness and the cruelty with which these poor relations of ours upon the carnal side are only too often treated.

The whole hypothesis is reasonable enough, indeed; for surely nothing is more probable than that a soothsayer and augur, accustomed to find omens in the actions of beasts and birds, should find a spiritual significance in the motions and groans of the ass beneath him which those who travelled with him did not so much as suspect. And if there are still any who find it a relief to look at the incident in this light, they will do well to look at it in this light. There is

no need to say a word against it,—no need even to remind them that the only Scripture which describes the ass as actually speaking *with man's voice* is the so-called Second Epistle of St Peter, and that this Epistle, which was not admitted into the canon of the early Church, seems in a fair way of being cut out from it by the scholarship of the modern Church. Nay, even if any should conclude that the Divine warning to the Prophet was thrown into a fabulous or legendary form by the simplicity of ancient times, I for one will not quarrel with them for that; but will rather admit that, as we find some admixture of fable or legend in all ancient literatures, so also we may reasonably expect to find some such admixture in the ancient Hebrew literature, since the Spirit of all truth, as He has used most of the other literary forms in which men instruct or delight each other, may very probably have used this form also for our instruction.

For myself, indeed, I care very little what interpretation may be placed on this singular passage in Balaam's story, and would as soon believe that the mouth of the dumb ass was really opened to utter articulate human words as that Balaam's sensitive and practised ear heard these words into his groans and cries. I would say, with F. D. Maurice: "*How* the dumb ass rebuked the madness of the prophet I know not, nor care to know. But I believe that whatever

sounds it uttered they did convey exactly that meaning to the mind of the prophet which it is said that they conveyed. He felt that the instinct of a brute was made the instrument of teaching him, that what he would not learn by gracious inward discipline was brought home to him by rough, humiliating, outward discipline. I feel too deeply the essential veracity of the story to be troubled with minute questions about its details." And hence I do not need to say with Ewald, "A beast is often more sagacious and foreboding than an obdurate man;" or with Keil, "that animals have a perception of the abnormal and even of the supernatural, is the popular belief of all ages." I could be content with Robertson[1] to pass it by with the curt parenthesis, "The intervention of the ass, *whether literal or figurative*," or even to pass it by, as Bishop Butler did, without a single word.

For, after all, what does it matter *what* we do with it, *how* we read it? Get rid of the speaking ass, if you will; you do not thereby get rid of the speaking angel. And if, as I suppose, the angel stood at least as high above the Prophet as the ass stood below him on the scale of being, the question how the angel could so speak as that Balaam should understand *him* is to

[1] Robertson (of Brighton) does indeed add a few words, very few, on the several ways in which the incident has been explained; but it is only to conclude, with Maurice: "There is too much profound truth throughout this narrative for us to care much about either the literal or the figurative interpretation."—*Sermons*, vol iv., p. 40.

the full as difficult and perplexing as the question which has been so long discussed,—how the ass could so speak as to be understood by the Prophet. Nay, if we are to talk of the difficulties of this ancient Chronicle, who will explain how, in what form and method, God Himself came to Balaam at night, and said: "Who are these men that are with thee?" or how the Spirit of God came upon him on the mountain, and opened his eyes to see the distant future, and taught his tongue to utter oracles the full meaning of which he himself could not grasp? The story is full of miracles—miracles so strange, complex, awful, that this poor wonder of the speaking ass sinks into utter insignificance, and one can only marvel how men should have been so profoundly impressed by this and yet so little moved by those. Nay, more, if we do but think of it, what—as Carlyle has asked—is the fact that man himself can speak, and speak with most miraculous organs, but a miracle? this miracle of Speech, too, running up into the still greater miracles of Thought and Life: all of them wonders which no advance of science is at all likely to explain, least of all that science, which sees the promise and the potency of all things in an infinite cataract of infinitesimal atoms, and whose votaries

> "Hedge their minds by present things,
> The small parochial world
> Of sight and touch."

To escape from miracles is simply impossible.[1] Every man who believes in God at all believes in the supernatural—believes, that is, in a supernatural order underlying the natural order; believes even in a supernatural Being who originated the natural order, who is immanent in it and transcends it. And every man who believes that God has in any way, or at any time, revealed his will to men, believes that the supernatural order has broken through the natural order which it underlies and in which it is immanent, believes that the supernatural Being has, so to speak, come forth from the secret places of the pavilion in which He habitually dwells, to manifest Himself to mankind. But if we believe in miracles at all, and especially if we believe them to be the necessary and inevitable adjuncts of any revelation of the Divine will, is it not a little childish of us to compare this miracle with that, and say, "This we can accept, but not that?" Is it not more than a little childish of us to stand discussing the inevitable accompaniments of Revelation while we neglect the revelation itself, and so fail to learn the very lesson for the sake of which the miracles were wrought?

As many of us as have received the Bible's own

[1] "Before giving a too credulous ear to those who would persuade us that this or that is incredible because it is a miracle, it were prudent to require them to put their finger on something that is not miraculous."—*Julian Hawthorne.*

account of itself decline to be so childish. We have reached a point of view from which all such difficulties as this cease to have any power over us, and stand on a rock from which we can be swept by no wave whether of Criticism or of Scepticism. For we believe that God's revelation of His will has been gradual and progressive, and that even to the end we have this heavenly treasure in earthen vessels. We believe that God revealed the truth to men as they were able to receive it, in and through the words with which they were familiar, in and through the mental and imaginative forms with which they were familiar. We believe that, if He deigned to speak to men at all, He *must* speak to them in the verbal, literary, and imaginative forms which they had invented, and which they employed *at the time He spoke.* And hence it does not disturb our faith in His Word to learn either that, when He would teach men that all things were created by Him at the beginning, He disclosed that initial and pregnant fact in the scientific terms of the age to which He taught it; or that, when He would rebuke the madness of a diviner, He should deign to use the forms in which such a man thought, or even the art which he pursued, and humble him by setting his own ass to prove how blind he was, despite his "open eye." It matters little to us whether the ass actually spoke or did not

speak, whether we have history here or fable. Nor does it perplex us to see that inspired writers regarded as history what we, perhaps, can only receive as parable. We say: If God was to speak to men, He could only speak to them through the words, the thoughts, the conceptions and beliefs, current among them at the time, just as a man can only speak to a child effectually by speaking as a child and thinking as a child. And if these verbal and mental forms were imperfect—as doubtless they were and still are —nevertheless the lessons conveyed through these imperfect forms were of a perfect wisdom. Though the vessels of Revelation be of earth, the treasure they contain is heavenly and from Heaven.

Hence it is that we can say with entire frankness and honesty: Put what construction on the talking ass you will; call it fact, call it fable, or say that Balaam read an ominous rebuke into the natural cries of the beast on which he rode,—whatever the construction you put upon it, you will be little the wiser for it, little the better unless you listen to the appeal, to the rebuke which Balaam heard from the mouth of the ass or put into it. That lesson may be, and is, a very simple one; but its very simplicity at once makes it the more valuable and renders it the more probable that, much as we need to learn it, we may have overlooked it.

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What, then, was this lesson or rebuke? The ass said, or Balaam took her to say, "Wherefore smite me? Have I not served thee faithfully ever since I was thine? Am I wont to rebel against you?" And how could one who had been accustomed to look for ethical and religious meanings in all the signs of nature fail to look for an ethical meaning in this appeal, or fail either to find it, or to find how heavy a rebuke it carried for himself? He too had a Master, a Master in heaven, and was loud and frequent in his protestations of loyalty to Him. Yet could *he* look up to heaven and say to his Master, "Why hast Thou checked and rebuked me? Have not I served Thee faithfully ever since I was Thine unto this day? Am I wont to disobey Thy word?" Why, at that very moment he was untrue, disloyal, to his Master; he was plotting how he might speak other words than those which God had put into his mouth, and serve his own will rather than the Divine will! Might he not, then, well hear in the rebuke of the ass some such appeal as this: "Have you been as true to your Master as I to mine? Have you been as mindful of the heavenly vision as I of the heavenly apparition which I have seen? Has your service been as faithful, as patient, as disinterested as mine?"

The lesson is simple enough, I admit; but is it not also most necessary and valuable? Once of old God

Himself had to appeal to those who professed to love and obey Him: "If I be a father, where is Mine honour? and if I be a master, where is My reverence?" Might He not make the same appeal to-day? And if He did, which of us could look up and reply: "Have not *I* been true to Thee ever since I was Thine? Am I wont to disobey Thee?"

The miracle of the speaking ass is, however, only one, and one of the least, of the many marvels of this ancient Chronicle. It sinks into utter insignificance when compared with the fact that God permitted his servant to go on an errand on which He had forbidden him to go, and was then displeased with him for availing himself of that permission. For if man can give a voice even to things without life, as the pipe or harp, and if God daily speaks to us by all the creatures He has made, insomuch that, albeit there are "so many kinds of voices in the world," yet "none of them is without significance for us,"[1] it may well have been that He should speak to the soothsayer by the dumb ass, and rebuke his madness by teaching him the significance of her movements and cries. But how are we to explain the fact that God should say to his servant both "Go" and "Do not go,"—should both allow him to set out on an errand He

[1] Corinthians xiv. 7, 10.

had prohibited and withstand him as he went upon it? Can we say that here too the difficulty is largely of our own making, and that we should never have been perplexed by it had we read the Chronicle with open eyes?

Yes, even here, and great as the difficulty seems to be, it is of our own making, at least in this sense, that it is not peculiar to the Bible, much less to this particular narrative in the Bible, but meets us at every step we take, and pervades the whole structure of human life. For is it only in the Bible that two potent but opposed voices are heard to speak within the soul of man? Is it only in the Bible that we find men allowed to disobey a Divine command, and yet withstood at every step in their downward course, and threatened with destruction should they persist in it? Do we not daily meet with those who, confessing that they too have a Master in heaven, confessing even that his commandments are good and right, nevertheless struggle against his high pure will, and plot how to disobey the very commands which they acknowledge they ought to obey? And if the Bible is to reflect human life fairly and to explain its true significance to us, must it not record this perplexing element in human life, and tell us what it means?

This, in brief, is the key to the whole mystery which confronts us here; and we have only to expand the

thought and illustrate it in order to arrive at a teaching full of comfort and of large hopeful suggestion.

Balaam, then, as we have seen, was a man of like passions with ourselves. In him, as in us, the flesh made war upon the spirit; base cravings for reward and for personal distinction struggled within him against his sense of duty and the noble aspirations and inspirations which impelled him to follow after truth and righteousness. It was to his interest, he thought, to curse the people whom God had bidden him bless; and there is too much truth in the bitter sarcasm of Epictetus, "Few men love anything, even their God, so much as their own interest." As he brooded over Balak's invitation, with its manifold promise of honour, reward, and influence, and prided himself perhaps on his courage in declining it, many regrets seem to have mingled with his self-approval, and to have prepared him to yield to the second and still more promising invitation when it reached him.

We are not to blame him, we do not blame him, simply because, when this second invitation came, he consulted God again to see whether He had anything "more" to say to him, any new command to give him. But we cannot but blame him if, as there is too much reason to believe, he went to God a second time to "get his duty *altered* rather than to learn what his duty *was*;" for, in that case this lover of righteous-

ness betrayed that his fundamental conception of righteousness was inaccurate and misleading, and shewed that he conceived of "the will of God as *making* right rather than as *being* right," as able, therefore, to sanction things wrong in themselves if only they were plausibly presented to Him or artfully veiled from his sight. Assuredly many since his time have thus thought of God; they have conceived of his will as a personal caprice, liable to alter with every wind of supplication, every breath of desire, instead of thinking of it as the steadfast and righteous law of the universe which, simply because it is right, cannot change. God might be "managed," he hoped, and induced at least to connive at the course he wished to take, or even tricked into conceding his sanction to it unawares. In short, he appears to have been in a very similar position to that which many men still take when, craving an indulgence very strongly, they half persuade themselves that it is not so sinful as they have been wont to think it, or that God will not be strict to mark and punish a sin to which they are urged by impulses so strong and so natural.

Now when a man's whole soul is darkened and confused by this conflict between interest and conscience, between duty and desire, mere words, however prohibitory and threatening, are of little avail. What can be said to him which has not been said to

him already, and has not already quickened echoes of assent within his own conscience and heart? As a rule, and if he is to be saved from his sin, and taught that God's will does not make right but is right, and cannot therefore vary with his varying moods, he must be allowed, he is allowed, to go out after the desire of his heart, to indulge his craving, and to see what comes of it. "When the spirit of a man thus contradicts itself, God becomes a contradiction to him, and He who had said 'Go not,' now says 'Go.'" With the froward God shews Himself froward, as with the upright He shews Himself upright; and that not in the Bible alone, but in the broad fields of daily human experience. Words of warning may still be vouchsafed; they were vouchsafed to Balaam; for when Jehovah, replying to the unspoken desire of his heart, said, "Go with the men if you will," He added, "But only that which I tell thee, that shalt thou do." But when desire is strong, and the Divine will is not recognized as an unchanged and unchangeable Righteousness, such words are of little use; such warnings are speedily consumed in the flame of the burning desire, or they are obscured by its fumes, or the intoxicated will presses blindly on to its gratification through every obstacle; or, cooled and chastened by the rebuke, it studies how to evade it, or

even to draw some specious but bastard sanction from it.[1]

And hence we are not surprised to hear that as Balaam went on his wilful way, and drew near to the close of his journey, something more than words was wanted to save him from open and flagrant disobedience. At the start, he may have persuaded himself that he was quite strong enough to meet the temptation face to face, that there was no fear of his going beyond the word of the Lord in small things or great, even with Balak's silver and gold full in view. But, as he went, his selfish, ambitious, and covetous desires grew stronger—as a cool observer with any knowledge of human nature would have expected them to do—fiercer, and yet more cunning, till, as we have seen, he was plotting how he might please Balak and indulge himself without wholly displeasing God. For if he had not been contriving to do what God had told him not to do, why should God's anger have been kindled against him? God is not angry with men for doing his will, but for *not* doing it.

What is most worthy of note and reflection, however, in the miracle which has drawn so much attention and comment is the pedagogic, *i.e.*, the educational and disciplinary, intention of it. We

[1] Robertson (Sermon IV. in Fourth Series), from whom the citations in this and the previous paragraph are taken.

daily see that God does permit men to walk in ways that are not good, and that his anger is kindled against them for walking in those ways. And how often does the question arise within us, "*Why* does He allow them? Why does He not forbid and prevent them? and what is the motive and end of his anger against them?" It matters little to us whether the ass did or did not speak: but it matters much to us that we should learn the secret of God's dealing with us when we too are torn by passionate desires, and overpowered by them, and hurried by them into courses which even we ourselves do not approve, however strongly we may be bent upon them.

Mark, then, the form which God's anger took with the Prophet who was scheming how he might disobey the word of the Lord. He sends an angel, with a sword, to withstand him in his way, to awaken him to the peril of the course to which he was leaning, and to terrify him into abandoning it. Here was a miracle, indeed, but a miracle of mercy— the marvellous loving-kindness of the Lord seeking to arrest his servant in his downward course and hold him back from sin.

In his blind preoccupation, however, he fails to see the angel of the Divine Mercy, and to take the warning vouchsafed him; and so the Divine interposi-

tion has to be carried a step further, and he exposes himself to the humiliation of being rebuked by his own ass. He is convicted of having cruelly wronged the innocent creature who had saved him from the sword; of having failed at his strongest point and lost the "open eye" of which he was wont to boast; and of not being as true to his Master in heaven, despite his loud professions of loyalty and obedience, as she had been to her master on earth. If no rebuke could be more severe and humbling, none surely could have been more kind and merciful. For if men are not to be held back from evil by an angel, is it not well that they should be held back even by an ass? If the gentler strokes of correction fail, is it not well that they should be followed by severer and more effectual strokes? If appeals to our higher nature do not suffice to arrest us, is it not well that we should be arrested by appeals to our lower nature?

Thus, at least, Balaam's eyes were opened. He saw the angel standing in the way with his sword drawn in his hand, and was told plainly why the angel had come forth to withstand him. It was because the "way," the course on which he was bent, was "foolhardy," rash, presumptuous, full of unsuspected dangers, and could only issue in his destruction. But for the superior sagacity of the ass whom he had smitten he would have been slain already; and if he

persisted in the evil course on which he was set, he was simply travelling to his doom. He was losing his prophetic power already, his power to see visions, to recognize spiritual presences, omens, warnings; and if he did not turn from the evil of his ways, he would soon loose *all*, and his own soul to boot.

It was thus that Balaam understood the Divine rebuke when, at last, he became capable of again hearing the words of God and seeing visions from the Almighty. For he confesses (Verse 34), "*I have sinned, for I knew not that* THOU *wast standing in the way against me.*" By which I take him to mean, not simply that he had sinned in not recognising a Spiritual Presence, but that the mere fact that he had not seen the heavenly apparition was a sufficient proof that he had sinned away his power; that by cherishing a sinful purpose in his heart he had clouded his spiritual insight, darkened the eyes of his mind, sunk not only below the level of the prophet, but even below the level of the brute, and so had justly been rebuked by a brute. So deeply is he convinced of his sin, of what he has lost by it, of the imminent and deadly perils to which it has exposed him, that he will even go back to his distant home, though his foot is on the very border of Moab, rather than displease God or the angel again.

But, no, that cannot be. A man is bound by his

past; his future is shaped by his past. When he has once entered on an evil course, a return to former innocence and simple uncomplicated obedience is impossible. He cannot go back and be what he once was. He has called new forces into play; he has introduced new conditions into his lot; and he must reckon with these now. Often his only chance is to go on in the new course on which he has entered —as when, for instance, a man has mistaken his true vocation, or made an unhappy marriage, or pledged himself to a losing bargain—and to be true to the voice of conscience or of God at all costs to himself, and be the consequences what they may. It would seem to have been thus with Balaam. He could hardly turn back now. He had entered into covenant with Balak, and Balak was close at hand, eagerly expecting him. All that he could do was to be faithful to God as well as to Balak, and to keep his vow that, come what would, he would not go against the commandment of the Lord. And, hence, as God had said to him in distant Pethor "Go with the men," that Balaam might put himself to the proof and come to know what manner of spirit he was of, so now the angel of the Lord repeats "Go with the men," that Balaam might be true to his compact with Balak and to the new conditions which he had accepted. But let us note also that just as God had added to his permission

a warning, "Go with them, *but only that which I shall tell thee, that shalt thou do,*" so also the angel of the Lord adds the selfsame warning, "Go with the men, *but only the word that I shall speak unto thee, that shalt thou speak.*" What it all came to was virtually this: "You have elected to set out on this foolhardy errand despite the promptings of your better part; you have pledged yourself to it. Go on with it then; but, O, take heed to yourself and to your ways; for only as you are true to God, and true to your better self, can you hope to escape the perils by which you are beset."

I do not see how any thoughtful man can consider this story without discovering why God allows men to enter on ways which are not good, and which are therefore full of peril, and why He nevertheless "withstands" them when they walk in them. He allows them to enter on such ways that they may come to know themselves as they are, in their weakness as well as in their strength, that they may see clearly what is evil in their nature as well as what is good; and He withstands them in order that they may become aware of the perils to which they are unconsciously exposing themselves, may feel their need of his guidance and help, and may suffer Him to save them from their sins, and out of weakness make them strong.

There is nothing in this miraculous intervention of the angel and the ass comparable in value to this revelation of the redeeming love and purpose of God. What does it matter how we read it, whether we take it as parable or history, if only we see in it how the very anger of God is but a form of his grace, and how He strove by warning and rebuke, by now appealing to his higher nature, and now appealing to his lower nature, to shew Balaam how low he had fallen, to chasten from his soul that selfish hankering after reward and distinction which was overmastering his love of righteousness, his sense of duty, to drive him from halting between that in himself which was good and honourable and that which was base and bad, and so to save him from the destruction which he had provoked? To my mind there is an infinite pathos, as there is also a teaching the most pertinent and valuable, in this detailed description of the struggle between the pure will of God and the impure will of man, in this patient and most merciful endeavour to unite a divided heart, and to purify a heart tainted with selfish and covetous desires. Any glimpse into a human heart thus at odds with itself could hardly fail to be impressive and instructive, for in every such heart we may find a reflection of our own. But when we see God ranging Himself on the side of all that is good and pure in such a heart, and seeking

by means exquisitely adapted to its needs to recover it to a settled love of truth and a steadfast pursuit of righteousness, we may well be rapt with wonder and with joy at so striking and pathetic an illustration of his love for us and of his method of dealing with us. For if his anger be a redeeming anger, and his very rebukes be intended for our salvation; if even when we walk in paths of our own choosing He is still leading us, still warning and protecting us against the unseen dangers we have affronted; if He is striving to make us true when we are most untrue, honest when we are most dishonest with Him and with ourselves, pure when we are most impure: if *this* be the secret of his Providence, what is any other secret to us as compared with this? What could more effectually nerve us for our daily struggle with the evil within us, or cast a more welcome and radiant light of hope on the great conflict between good and evil which is going on around us, in the world at large and in every human breast?

That this *was* the end and purpose of God in dealing with Balaam is plain. To whatever depths of infamy he ultimately fell, he was for the time a saved man. Let Balak tempt, let him flatter or browbeat Balaam as he would, day by day the Prophet consistently refused to go against the commandment of the Lord, or to speak any words save those which

God put into his mouth. As we follow him from mountain to mountain, weighing every action and word, and half expecting that he will yield to his own base craving or to the pressure put upon him by the disappointed and incensed king, we detect no sign of irresolution in him; no faltering tone falls from his lips; and when at last Balak drives him from his presence with bitter ridicule and contempt, he can honestly and proudly claim that he has been true to his vow, and has neither done nor said anything, good or bad, of his own mind, but has faithfully uttered the words that were given him to speak.

And why should we doubt that God's purpose in withstanding Balaam is also his purpose in withstanding us? What *can* He desire for us but that we too should rise into a settled love of the truth and a steadfast pursuit of righteousness? If we are to remain men, with discourse of reason, and to be taught why our wills are our own, He cannot stop us by force when we set out in wrong and foolhardy ways; nor, when we have walked in those ways, can He relieve us from the pressure of the evil past we have left behind us. That would be to reduce us from men to mere automata, to degrade us into the mere puppets of his power. He can only permit us to walk on in the paths we have chosen, to gratify our clamorous desire, and take the wage we have thereby earned, and dis-

cover how little it is to our mind. Or, if He is to arrest us in our course, it can only be by revealing its dangers to us before we are overwhelmed by them, warning and instructing us by appeals to all that is highest and noblest in us, or by the rebukes of pain and fear and loss. If He makes our way hard, it is that we may leave it ; if He permits the consequences of past transgressions to gather round and upon us, it is that we may renounce them ; if He teaches us the vanity of our desires by granting them, it is only that we may be henceforth true to our loftier aims. What should, what can He "withstand" us for but to turn us back ? Why should He lead us to the dizzy edge of the precipice and light up its depths with the warning flashes of his anger, save that we may recoil from it ? What can be his purpose in teaching us that "the end of these things is death," but that we may turn and live ?

To the spiritual and attentive heart all the miseries that wait on sin are but the pangs and sobs of his wounded love, crying to us, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die ?" And the great value of the story of Balaam is that it confirms this intuition of the heart, and shews us the love of God streaming through the rebukes with which He visits transgression, and working through them for the redemption of a great yet sordid soul, a soul in which good and evil were blended as in

our own. No revelation can be more acceptable or helpful to us than this. As we stand scanning the various ways of men, and marking how strangely good and evil are blended in every soul and therefore in every lot, and how human life is but an evolution from the past conducted along the lines of an iron necessity, so that no man can escape from himself and the conditions which he has created for himself and the punitive consequences of his own deeds, we should altogether lose heart did we not know and believe that this evolution is conducted by a Divine Hand; that a Heart of Mercy beats under the iron necessities of the law by which we are governed; and that the free grace of God is able to quicken a new spirit and therefore a new life in men, and so to set new forces at work for their redemption, nay, to compel even the necessities of pain and shame and loss to contribute to their redemption. And hence it is that the spectacle of this Love and Grace at work for the redemption of a spirit in which the elements were so mixed as they are in us touches us very nearly, and kindles within us a sure and certain hope both for ourselves and for the world.

Here, then, I think we may pause. We have run our small problem up into that great mystery of Necessity and Freewill, against which men have bruised their brains for the last four thousand years;

and perchance even that great mystery may have grown a little less oppressive to us if we have learned that, while we are bound by the chains which we and our fathers have forged in the past, all escape from them is not impossible, since the grace of God may quicken and call into action new and redemptive forces within us which, if only we are true to them and give them free play, will yet raise us from our low and fallen estate, conduct us into new and happier conditions, and so lift us into a new and better life.

§ 3. The Oracles. (Numbers xxii. 36—xxiv. 25.)

Fresh from his encounter with the angel of the Lord, and with the echoes of the Divine rebuke of his duplicity still making "a fearful music" in his soul, Balaam arrives at Ir, a city on the extreme north-eastern boundary of Moab; and here he meets a new antagonist. Messengers had no doubt been sent on, after the Eastern fashion, to announce his approach to the King; for we find that Balak had left his capital (Rabbah) and come forth to this border city to receive him. A twofold motive may have prompted the King. He may have intended, and probably did intend, to give the Prophet a signal mark of his favour; and, according to Oriental notions, he could have shewn him no greater honour than by coming so far to meet him. But, though on courtesy bent, he may also have shewn a frugal mind; and probably in coming so far to meet the Prophet his strongest motive was to save time. For the mountains from which he proposed that Balaam should overlook and curse the camp of Israel lay in the immediate vicinity of Ir-Moab; and it is easy to see that Balak was impatient to have the curse pronounced, thought that

too much time had been wasted already, and was in no mood to brook another instant of unnecessary delay.

Kings do not easily bow before an authority higher than their own; and even when they are obliged to court the aid of an eloquence, a statesmanship, or a genius for war, which they do not themselves possess, they are apt to suspect and dislike the very instruments they are compelled to use. There is a touch of this royal insolence in the demand with which king Balak greets the Prophet he has sent so far to fetch: "Did I not urgently send unto thee to call thee? Wherefore didst thou not come unto me? Am I not able, forsooth, to promote thee unto honour?" But a man who has stood face to face with God is not likely to fear the frown of a king; and hence Balaam replies with quiet dignity: "Behold, I *have* come unto thee! (But) have I any power at all (now that I have come) to say anything? The word that Jehovah shall put into my mouth, that (only) will I speak." His dignified reply had its effect; for the next thing we hear of these two men is that they rode peacefully together to a city called *Kirjath-huzzoth*,[1]

[1] Knobel conjectures, with some probability, that *Kirjath* may have been an older form of *Kerioth*. The sole interest of the conjecture lies in the fact that Judas *Iscariot*, *i.e.*, Judas of *Kerioth*, came from a place which bore the same name, though in a different locality; and thus supplies a sort of link between the Prophet who turned traitor to Jehovah and the Apostle who betrayed Jesus.

an ancient *Strass-burg,* or "city of streets" as its name implies, or perhaps the word rather means "a fort with streets" round it. It was probably, therefore, a border-fortress on the way to the ranges of Attarus and Abarim, from divers peaks of which they were to look down on the Hebrew encampment. Here Balak holds a feast in honour of Balaam's arrival, sending the best portions of the oxen and sheep he slew to Balaam's table, as an Arab sheikh would do to this day on receiving a guest whom he delighted to honour.

On the morrow, early in the morning, Balak rode with Balaam to a neighbouring summit consecrated to the service of his god, and thence called Bamoth-Baal, or "high place of Baal," on which therefore there was probably a grove of sacred trees, and from which they could look down and see the host of Israel encamped upon the plain beneath. And no doubt the site was chosen partly because it was a sacred place, very meet therefore for a religious imprecation, just as the anathemas of the Pope are supposed to gain special force because they issue from St Peter's chair, and partly because it was an article of ancient superstition that the seer must have those whom he was to curse under his eye if his curse were to take effect.

This latter superstition Balaam may have shared, but from the former he hastens to detach himself.

He is the servant of Jehovah, not of Baal, and he will not stoop or affect to serve any but the only true God. When, therefore, they reach the "high place" he separates himself decisively from the idolatry of which it was the haunt. He will not use the altars of Baal, nor join in any of the Moabitish rites. In a tone of authority he bids Balak "build *me* seven altars, and prepare *for me* seven bullocks and seven rams." And these altars were dedicated, these sacrifices were presented, as we learn from a subsequent Verse (Chap. xxiii. 4), not to Baal, but to Jehovah.

Among the ancients sacrifices preceded every enterprise of pith and moment, especially of course any ceremony of adjuration; and these sacrifices grew more costly in proportion as the ceremony or enterprise was deemed critical and important. Since bullocks and rams were the chief victims of the Patriarchal and Mosaic altars, and seven was the number of perfection and completion, we may fairly infer from the seven bullocks and seven rams which Balaam proceeded to offer on the seven altars, that both the Prophet and the King attached the gravest importance to the enterprise in which they were now engaged.

An ancient augur, moreover, habitually chose some lofty spot, with a wide and open outlook, in which to

watch for omens and indications of the Divine will; and hence we can understand why, after having offered his holocausts in the sacred grove, Balaam went forth from its shade to "a bare place," a scaur, leaving the King to stand by the altars. He wanted to be alone and undisturbed that he might be the more sensitive to any spiritual impact, any touch of spiritual light or force, whether from within or from without. And he also wanted (Chap. xxiv. 1) to secure a wide view of earth and sky in which to detect some portent that his art would enable him to interpret. For in this, or in some similar form, he expected the Lord to "meet" him, to direct and illuminate his mind, and to give him some inkling of things that were to be. And in this, or in some similar way, God did meet him and put a word into his mouth; that is to say, the conviction was borne in upon him that he knew what the Lord would have him say, what he *must* say therefore, however unwelcome it might be, however fatal to his interests and desires. He returns to the sacred grove, therefore, and faithfully delivers the burden of the Lord.

The oracles of Balaam are full of interest to the historian, the antiquarian, and the literary artist, as well as to the student of theology; and did the occasion require, it would not be difficult for one who has studied these oracles patiently and minutely to

throw some light on certain curious psychological and literary problems. But the occasion does not require it. Our main endeavour is to decipher the character of Balaam, to reach such a conception of it as shall bring him within the recognized limits of our common humanity. And hence we need not enter into the difficult literary and philosophical problems which his oracles suggest, but may be content simply to seize such indications of character as they afford.

One of these characteristics pervades the whole series. The honesty, the veracity, of Balaam is conspicuous throughout. Whatever base cupidity or selfish ambition he may have cherished on the journey from Mesopotamia to Moab, no trace of it is to be found in the predictions he utters. And it would have been so easy for him to be dishonest, to utter words of double meaning, words which, while formally a curse on Israel, were really a benediction, and thus to seem to comply with Balak's wish, while nevertheless he ran counter to it! Many of the ancient oracles took this dubious form, offering a word of promise to the ear, while they broke it to the hope. The oracles of Dodona and Delphi, for instance, habitually paltered with words in a double sense; as when they informed Crœsus that, if he attacked the Persians, he would "destroy a mighty empire," but quite omitted to inform him that that empire would

be his own.[1] And our own Shakespeare supplies us with a similar illustration of "the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth" in the oracle which deceived Macbeth: "Fear not, till Birnam wood do come to Dunsinane." The temptation to Balaam thus to equivocate with Balak, and to make truth itself a liar, must have been immense. For he loved reward; and, after buoying up the King with false hopes, he might easily—had he been the villain which some assume him to be—have gone off with the silver and gold before the event betrayed him. But he does not listen to, we cannot even detect a single symptom that he so much as felt, the temptation. From first to last he is true to his vocation, and speaks out simply and gravely the thoughts which God had put into his heart.

And who can doubt that it was the intervention of the Angel and the Ass which made and kept him sincere? His "madness" had been effectually rebuked, so effectually that while he remains with Balak we see no trace of its return. Was not that, then, a most merciful rebuke, however humiliating and severe it may have seemed, which exorcised the evil spirit that he had been cherishing, and made a true man and a true prophet of him, at least for a

[1] *Herodotus*, Book I., chap. 53. It would be easy to give many similar instances from the pages of Herodotus alone.

time? If *this* was the end of the miracle, was it not a worthy and sufficient end?

First Oracle.

Balaam's First Oracle, which, like many of the ancient heathen oracles, took a poetic form, runs thus (Chap. xxiii. 7-10) :—

From Aram hath Balak brought me,
The King of Moab from the mountains of the East,
(Saying) Come, curse me Jacob,
And, come, ban Israel!
How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed,
Or how shall I ban whom the Lord hath not banned?
For from the summit of the rocks I see them,
And I behold them from the hills;
Lo, it is a people that dwelleth apart,
And is not reckoned among the nations.
Who can count the dust of Jacob,
Or number the fourth part of Israel?[1]
Let me die the death of the righteous,
And be my last estate like his!

With the exception of the tremulous sigh with which it concludes, the oracle seems little more than a simple statement of the events by which the Prophet had been led to his present position, and an equally simple description of the scene beneath his

[1] An allusion to the four camps into which the Hebrew host was divided.

eyes. But, as we look into it, we discover traces of character in it which help us to understand the man, and to understand him in the loftier and nobler aspects of his nature. There is not only an assertion of his unalterable fidelity to the God whom he serves, of the utter impossibility of his cursing any whom God has not cursed; but, obviously, he is even more profoundly impressed by the *holiness* of the people on whom he looks down from the summit of the rocks than by their vast numbers or their power. He cannot but see that they are like the dust of the earth for multitude; but what strikes him most is that which any but a genuine lover of righteousness might altogether have failed to perceive. It is that they are a people called to "dwell apart," and not to be reckoned among the nations around them. The isolation of the camp as he looked down upon it from the heights, its sharply defined limits as it lay in the great plain of the Jordan, its orderliness, and a something peculiar and unique in its aspect, may have suggested this thought to him; but, whatever suggested it, there can be no doubt that it arrested and impressed him. For by this separateness he does not mean simply that, under the protection of Jehovah, they are to dwell in safety, unvexed by the strifes and tumults of other races; but, mainly, that they are a people of other and better

laws, pursuing a different and nobler ideal than other races. Separation is here, as throughout the Old Testament, the symbol of sanctity, the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the grace which impels men to the pursuit of a pure and unworldly life, and makes righteousness, rather than culture or power or wealth, their chief end and highest good.

Summoned to curse this peculiar people, he can conceive no higher wish than that he may share their aim and fate. And there is a special force and pathos in the form into which he casts this wish. He projects himself into the future, and asks himself how he shall crave to have lived when he comes to die. Under the shadow of death, when the garish lights, by which during their brief day on earth men are too often misled and betrayed, are withdrawn, they discriminate the true aims of life more clearly and are most profoundly sensible of their worth. Hence Balaam draws the solemnity of death into his thoughts, and, in that revealing darkness, finds that his supreme desire is that he may be able to look back on a well spent, a pure and kindly life, a life ennobled and insured by the protection and love of God. His ideal of righteousness was, as we learn from Micah, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God; and he feels that, unless his ideal be attained, he cannot die at peace.

Second Oracle.

This is the noblest posture of the soul in which we have yet seen this strange Prophet; but in the Second Oracle he touches a still higher point, and takes a more penetrating tone.

Angered and disheartened by the result of his first experiment, Balak nevertheless determined to risk another. With what seems to us a childish simplicity, but long seemed to our fathers the dictate of practical sagacity and piety, he was content to seek for omen after omen till he got one to his mind, and then, forgetting all the portents which foreboded disaster, to commit himself to that which flattered his hopes. Hence he shifts his ground, and conducts Balaam to a still more sacred and conspicuous spot, the Field of the Watchers or of the Seers as it was called, on the top of Pisgah, a peak of the mountain chain of Abarim, a little north of the Attarus range which they had just left. From this point, though it was nearer to the camp of the Israelites, an intervening spur may have shut out from view the greater part of the camp; for—and here we have another illustration of the simplicity of antique superstitions—Balak seems to have thought that the Prophet may have been daunted by the vast numbers of the host on which

he looked down from the summit of Bamoth-Baal, and would find it easier to curse them if he did "not see them all" (Chap. xxiii. 13).[1]

On Pisgah, then, and in a field set apart for divination, as on Bamoth-Baal, altars were built, sacrifices offered; and once more the Prophet left the King, to seek for auguries. As he gazed down on the plain beneath him, his eye would pass, beyond the Hebrew host, to the river Jordan, on the broad margin of which they were encamped. And here, possibly, while he heard the sound of the trumpet which called them to worship, and the shout with which they greeted it floated up to his ear, he may have seen buffaloes and lions going up from the swellings of Jordan, and have found in *these* the omens of which he was in quest, as he certainly found the dominant figures of his Second Oracle; which runs thus (Chap. xxiii. 18-24):—

Arise, Balak, and hear;
Hearken unto me, thou son of Zippor!
God is not a man that He should lie,
Nor a son of man that He should repent.
Hath He said, and shall He not do it,
Or hath He spoken, and shall he not make it good?
Behold, I have been charged to bless;

[1] In his *Heth and Moab* (pp. 136, 143), Captain Conder reports that the black tents of Israel, in the white gorge of Abel Shittaim, would be better seen from Bamoth-Baal than from Pisgah, but would only be fully seen from Peor.

And if He blesseth, I cannot reverse it.
No iniquity is to be descried in Jacob,
No distress to be seen in Israel :
The Lord their God is with them,
And the trumpet-shout of their King among them.
God brought them forth from Egypt ;
They have the bison's strength.
For there is no augury in Jacob,
Nor any divination in Israel ;
But in due time it is told to Jacob,
And to Israel, what God doeth.
Behold, they are a people that rise up like a lioness,
And lift themselves up as a lion ;
They lie not down till they eat their prey
And drink the blood of the slain.

No wonder that Balak was angry as he listened to this lofty strain, and in his anger cried out on the Prophet, " Thou shalt never curse them again, nor bless them again ; " for here was the knell of all his hopes. He is summoned at the outset to rise and brace himself for tidings that will go near to unman him ; and, as Balaam's song goes on, his worst prognostics are verified and surpassed. He learns that he is bent on " a hopeless contest against overwhelming numbers," a contest with a race strong as the bison, fierce and unrelenting as the lion when he seeks for prey, and which all the power of Egypt had not been able to withstand. He learns that the God who brought them forth from Egypt is still with them and for them, their Guide, Ruler, and Saviour, and that

He is neither to be tricked nor cajoled into enmity against them.

But it is with Balaam that we are concerned, not with Balak; and this Second Oracle shews him to us at his best, in his most piercing insight, in his noblest poise. He repeats in firmer accents (Verse 19) his belief in the unchangeable fidelity of God. He depicts in a more memorable and impressive phrase the righteousness and consequent blessedness of Israel. Nothing, indeed, could well be happier or more significant than the sentence, *No iniquity is to be descried in Jacob*, and therefore *no distress is to be seen in Israel*, with its fine implication that the sins of men are the sole cause of their miseries, and that their miseries are intended to correct their sins.

But fine as is the spirit of such sentences as these, the noble frankness and veracity of the man when he was at his best come out still more strikingly in the two passages which bear, directly or indirectly, on his vocation as a soothsayer and a prophet. For the Soothsayer affected to shape and change the Divine will as well as to predict it, to vary the currents in which it ran, and even to direct it against this man or that at his pleasure. But even in the presence of the King and the princes who deemed so highly of his power, and valued him above all for this very gift, Balaam plainly disavows the power they ascribed to

him. He frankly confesses, "Behold, I have been charged to bless, and if He blesseth, *I cannot reverse it.*" Nay, more, even in respect of that skill of his craft, or gift of his vocation, which he still claims to possess, the power to divine the future, he humbly acknowledges that this is but a poor gift at the best, very far from being so precious as it was accounted, and not to be compared with the grace vouchsafed to every child of Israel, however lowly his position, however limited his range. The Hebrews are so strong, he says, God loves them and dwells with them, *because there is no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel; but in due time it is told them what God doeth.*[1] That must have been a wonderful glimpse into the ways of God with men which led a diviner to decry his own art, and to confess that to wait with childlike confidence on God till in due time He reveals his will is a far greater and more precious gift than to force or surprise the secrets of the future and to pass in spirit through the times to be. God "met" Balaam to purpose when He taught him a truth which men, and even Christian men, have not yet learned, —that a little trust is better than much foresight, and that to walk with God in patient and loving dependence is better than to know the things to come.

And this insight into the real value of his special

[1] Comp. Deuteronomy xviii. 9-22.

gift was part of that training, that discipline, by which, as we have seen, God was seeking to save his servant from his besetting sin. For Balaam was proud of the gift which set him apart from and above his fellows, of the eagle eye and unyielding spirit which made the supernatural as easy and familiar to him as the natural, while *they* were trembling before every breath of change and finding omens of disaster in the simplest occurrences of daily experience. He was apt to boast that he was the man of an open eye, hearing the voice of God and seeing visions from the Almighty, falling into trances in which the shadows of coming events were cast upon his mind, and that he could read all secrets and understand all mysteries. Unlike the great Hebrew prophets, who humbly confessed that the secret of the Lord is with all who fear Him, and so made themselves one with their fellows, he was perverting his high gifts to purposes of self-exaltation and self-aggrandisement. Was it not, then, most salutary that he should be checked and rebuked in this selfish and perilous course? And how could he be more effectually rebuked than by being shewn a whole race possessed of even higher gifts than his own, possessed above all of the gift of waiting for God to reveal his will to them in due time, and so raised out of all dependence on divinations and enchantments? At this spectacle even his own high and

sacred endowment seemed but a vulgar toy, and the aspiration was kindled in his breast for that greater good, that greatest of all gifts, the power to walk in ways of righteousness and to leave the future, with simple trust, in the hands of God.

It is a lesson which we still need to learn. For which of us would not rejoice had he prophetic raptures and trances of which to boast, if men looked up to him as possessed of a solitary and mysterious power, and resorted to him that he might forecast their fate and interpret to them the mysteries by which they are perplexed? Which of us does not at times long to pierce the veil and learn how it fares with those whom we have loved and lost a while, or even what will be the conditions of our own life in years to come or when death shall carry us away, instead of waiting until in due time God shall reveal even this unto us? Let us, then, learn from Balaam, if we have not yet learned it from David or St Paul, that to rest in the Lord and to wait patiently for Him is a higher achievement than to apprehend all mysteries; and that to do his will in humble trust is a nobler function and power than to foresee what that Will will do.'

Third Oracle.

Disheartened and exasperated by the strain of Balaam's Second Oracle, the king of Moab, for a time at least, abandoned all hope of inducing him to curse Israel, and sought only to withhold him from blessing them. But the purpose which originally moved him to send for the Prophet lay too near his heart to be easily relinquished. Hence he soon rallies and nerves himself for a final effort. He cannot altogether shake off his dejection, however; we can still detect some trace of it in the words in which he invites Balaam to a third and last trial of his skill. He no longer maintains the confident and sanguine tone of his former request, "Come with me to another place, and curse me them from thence"; but, conscious of the risk he runs, he speaks with a certain hesitation and distrust: "Come, I will bring thee to another place; *peradventure it may please God* that from thence thou shouldest curse me them."

Still he will leave no chance untried. He travels northward from Pisgah to another peak of the Abarim range, and conducts Balaam to another sacred place, the very name of which (Peor) shews that it was dedicated to Baalpeor, the most shamelessly sensual but best-beloved of the gods of Moab. Perchance

the conditions may here prove more favourable, or the god more potent. At least one of the conditions is wholly reversed. For whereas heretofore Balak had carefully led the Prophet to points of view from which he could see only a small part of the Hebrew camp, lest he should be cowed by their number, he now conducts him to a point from which he obtains an uninterrupted view of the whole vast host, "encamped according to their tribes" (Chap. xxiv. 2), in the valley or plain below,—hoping, I suppose, that he may take them all in in one comprehensive and withering glance. From the Cliff of Peor, indeed, as we learn from one of the most recent travellers in the East,[1] the Prophet would not only look down on the whole camp of Israel, he would also (see the next Oracle) have Moab, Edom, and the City of David in view, and even "the rocky nest of the Kenite never to be wasted till Assyria carried him captive."

Here, then, in this thrice-sacred mountain grove, new altars are built, new sacrifices offered. But the new scene is so far from yielding new omens that Balaam does not so much as go out to some bare spot to look for them. He had learned the lesson that "God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man that He should repent." And hence he no longer "as at other times" goes out "to seek for auguries,"

[1] Captain Conder, in "Heth and Moab," page 143.

but remains beside the king, gazing steadfastly down on the wonderful and suggestive scene beneath him, and allowing that wonderful spectacle to make its own impression on his mind, being inwardly assured that it is the will of God that he should bless the people whose goodly tents in fair array attract his eye, and inwardly resolute that he will not curse them come what may. How, indeed, should he trust in auguries to whom, as we learn from his Second Oracle, it had been revealed that one great secret of the strength and righteousness of the Hebrew host lay in the fact that "there was no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel, but in due time it is told them what God doeth;" who had learned, therefore, to distrust his own art, and to admit that to wait on God with simple child-like confidence until it is his good pleasure to disclose his will is a far nobler and higher achievement than to anticipate what to-morrow may bring forth? God *had* disclosed that will to him, his will to bless the sons of Abraham and not to curse them; and on this disclosure Balaam is resolved to act, let him lose what he may by his fidelity to the Divine command.

And verily he had his reward. For now we are told, not simply that "God met him and put a word into his mouth," but that "the Spirit of God *came upon* him" with overmastering force, flinging him to

the earth indeed, but lifting him into an ecstasy in which he looked with open and illuminated eyes through the years to be, and saw what they would bring forth.

Under this mighty inspiration, he "takes up his parable," *i.e.*, his thoughts rise into poetic form, and his voice breaks into song as he delivers his Third Oracle (Chap. xxiv. 3-9).

Thus sayeth Balaam, the son of Beor,
And thus sayeth the man whose eyes are open;
Thus sayeth he who heareth the words of God,
He who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with opened eyes:
How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob,
Thy tabernacles, O Israel!
As valleys that are spread out,
As gardens by the river's side,
As aloes which the Lord hath planted,
As cedars beside the waters!
Water shall stream from his buckets,
And his seed be by many waters;
And his king shall be higher than Agag,
And his kingdom shall be exalted.
God brought him forth out of Egypt:
He hath the bison's strength:
He shall eat up the nations that are round about him,
And shall suck their bones,
And break their loins in pieces.
He croucheth, he lieth down like a lion,
And like a lioness, who shall rouse him up?
Blessed are they that bless thee,
And cursed are they that curse thee.

There are some repetitions here which have a

double worth. For when we find in this Third Oracle, uttered in a prophetic rapture and under the pressure of a kind of Divine "possession," thoughts, words, figures which we have already met with in the Second Oracle, for which no such absolute inspiration is claimed, we cannot but feel that, even under the extremest pressure, "the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet;" that even when, to use the phrase of Novalis, he is "a God-intoxicated man," yet in the full torrent, tempest, and whirlwind of the prophetic frenzy, he remains *himself* and in full possession of himself; his powers exalted, not obliterated; enlarged in volume and scope, yet radically unchanged. And when we mark what these repetitions are,—how he still asserts that it was God who brought Israel up out of Egypt, still likens their strength to that of the bison or buffalo, still compares them to the lion and lioness crouching over their prey, whom none dares to challenge or provoke, still insists, therefore, that Balak would simply court his own destruction were he to attack them, we cannot fail to be impressed with the fearless honesty with which Balaam delivers the burden of the Lord, let the King cajole or threaten as he will. No message can be more unwelcome to himself, or more fatal to Balak's hopes, than that with which he is charged; but, nevertheless, he is true to God, and true to man,

and speaks only the word which was given him to speak.

This prophetic trance, or rapture, may have been either a new, or more probably a rare, experience for Balaam; and hence he describes it with much emphasis in Chapter xxiv., Verses 3 and 4, repeating his description, with some slight variations, in Verses 15 and 16. From this description we learn that he had sought to acquire knowledge, and above all knowledge of the will of God and of the principles on which that high Will rules the affairs and destinies of men, not by arts of divination alone, not only by studying omens and auguries and interpreting them according to the approved rules of his art, but also by patient brooding meditation on the ways of God with men. We learn that by chastening himself from vulgar aims and rude animal desires, which were very strong in him, he had sought to attain the pure heart without which no man can see the Lord, to make his inward ear sensitive to "words of God" which others could not hear, to open his inward eye to the spiritual significance of events, so that he might see "visions from the Almighty" which others could not see; and that, at times, when he had thus prepared himself to receive the heavenly Guest, the Spirit of God fell upon him with a force which, if it flung him to the earth, so strangely energized and elevated his spiritual

faculties and powers that, lying prostrate but with opened eyes, all the horizons of thought grew luminous with a more than mortal light, and shot out far and wide beyond their usual scope, so that he could look quite through the shows of things to the sacred realities behind them, and even penetrate the future and discern the things that must shortly come to pass. It was this noble bent and gift of his spirit which made the man no vulgar soothsayer merely, but a genuine prophet, and which gave him his mastery over the spirits of his fellows.

It is in this high mood, too, that he now looks down on the Hebrew host, and, as if carried away by the imposing aspect of their vast yet orderly camp, addresses himself directly to them, and exclaims, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!" He instantly recovers himself, however; for it is not the children of Israel, but the king and princes of Moab to whom he has to speak; and, for their instruction and warning, he proceeds to depict the blessedness and the irresistible might of the race they would have him curse.

The dominant figure in which his conception of their happy estate is conveyed is one which would commend itself to every Oriental mind; for to the Oriental no emblem carries such a sense of wealth and felicity as an abundance of water. And it is curious

to note how Balaam harps on this emblem with an iteration which would have been unnatural in a Western poet, and which, in any case, an English poet would have sought to avoid. He compares them to "gardens *by the river's side;*" to "cedars *beside the waters;*" to a man bearing two buckets so full and overfull that the "*water streams*" from them as he moves. And, as if all this were not enough, he declares that the seed, *i.e.*, the posterity, of Israel shall grow up "*beside many waters.*" By this insistance on a symbol so grateful and suggestive to an Eastern mind, he doubtless sought to convey, and succeeded in conveying to his hearers, a full conception of the Divine favour for Israel, and made them feel that under the blessing of God his people were to enjoy the richest benedictions, the most lavish wealth and prosperity, which heart of man could conceive. No doubt, too, he took this image, as Dr Kalisch suggests, from the scene on which he looked down. For the land beyond the Jordan, which Israel was to possess, was a goodly and delightsome land mainly because it was "a land of brooks, a land of fountains and lakes that sprang out of valleys and hills," a land that constantly "drank water from the rain of heaven." But this image, derived from the physical features of Palestine, the land to which Israel was going up, is complicated apparently by reminiscences

of Babylonia, the land from which Balaam had come. "Valleys that widened out" were before his eyes as he stood on Peor; but when he proceeds to compare Israel to "gardens by the river's side," his thoughts probably revert to the famous artificial gardens on the banks of the Euphrates which were reckoned among the wonders of the ancient world. So, again, when he declares, "His seed shall be by many waters," he may refer to the innumerable brooks and streamlets of the goodly land; but when he compares the ideal Israel to a man bearing streaming buckets, he obviously alluded to a mode of irrigation which obtained in his Mesopotamian home, where he must often have seen the weary peasants staggering up from the river with the yoke of buckets which they were about to pour on the thirsty fields.

Under these rural and pacific figures, then, the Prophet depicts the coming wealth and felicity of the people whom the Lord had blessed. But he is careful to point out[1] that the wealth and happiness of Israel are not to be "purchased by an inglorious obscurity." They are to be "coupled with the highest political power and splendour." They are to be "the fruit of famous wars and brilliant victories." The nation which has the strength of the buffalo is to use it like a buffalo—to "eat up the nations that are round about

[1] Dr Kalisch *in loco*.

it, to suck their bones and break their loins in pieces." Fierce and valiant as the lion, they are to hunt down their prey, and to drink the blood of the slain, till none shall dare to rouse them up. By their valour and their wealth they are to build up a kingdom exalted above the other kingdoms of the earth, and—adds the Prophet in a singular phrase which demands a word of explanation—to secure a king "higher than Agag."

As we read the Oracle, this name, "Agag," checks one curiously. It seems wholly out of place, and meaningless, and only breaks up the flow and rush of the prophetic strain. Nevertheless we find it quite in place, and full of meaning, so soon as we remember that Agag was the dynastic name of the kings of Amalek, just as Pharaoh was the name of an Egyptian dynasty, and corresponds to such English dynastic names as Plantagenet, Tudor, Stuart, Guelph. For Amalek was the fighting and victorious clan of the Desert. It had recently conquered most of the adjacent clans and kingdoms. It was the first to meet and make war against the Israelites as they approached the end of their long pilgrimage. When Moses defeated Amalek, all the clans of Syria—Edomites, Moabites, Midianites, Canaanites—were amazed, and read their own doom in that of this warlike race. So that when Balaam predicts for Israel a king "higher

than Agag," what he would be understood to mean was that this happy and wealthy race is to take a higher position than even that which Amalek had held, and to exercise a wider sovereignty. None will be able to stand before them. One by one they will all be subdued, and compelled to submit to the king of Israel as their suzerain or overlord.

There may be, and probably is, another allusion in this dynastic name. For the word *Agag*, like the English name Hugh, means "high." And it would be quite in accordance with the manner and spirit of Hebrew poetry to introduce even into its loftiest strains a pun upon this name, and to play with the meaning of the word in a double sense. In all probability, therefore, besides alluding to the historic position of Amalek, Balaam intended an allusion to the literal significance of the word "Agag," and meant to convey that the king of Israel would be superior even to the king whose hereditary name was *High*—"higher than High;" for it is one of the characteristic traits of Hebrew poetry to relieve its most solemn utterances with a playful touch of this kind, and to bring in a pun which, however vulgar and poor it may sound to us, seemed vastly witty and suggestive to the simplicity of the ancient Eastern world.

In closing his Oracle the Prophet once more addresses himself directly to the Hebrew host:

"Blessed are they that bless thee, and cursed are they that curse thee." But though he speaks as to Israel, his words were doubtless meant for Balak and his princes,—meant to warn them against seeking some more treacherous and accommodating diviner than himself, who, for a sufficient reward, would utter the curse against Israel which *he* refused to utter. Such a curse would only "come home to roost." If Balak were wise, he would relinquish his vain attempt against the people whom the Lord had blessed, and, by allying himself with them, win some share in their prosperity and peace.

The whole of the Third Oracle is now before us; and if we look back and consider it as a whole, there is one question which can hardly fail to occur to us. Balaam was, as we have seen, a genuine prophet, and faithfully delivered the message which God put into his mouth. And yet, after all, were his predictions fulfilled, did his words come true? *When* did the Hebrew nation enjoy that lavish prosperity and abundance, or achieve the vast military success which he foretold for them? Not certainly for some four or five hundred years after Balaam had gone to his own place. Under the Judges Israel was divided, plundered, enslaved; and though, in the closing years of David's reign and the opening years of the reign of

Solomon, it touched the top of happy prosperous hours, and achieved a military predominance over all the adjacent kingdoms, yet this period of marvellous wealth and power formed but a brief episode in its history, an episode quite out of tune with the general strain of its annals, and was succeeded by ages of discord, strife, poverty, captivity, and subjection. Take their history as a whole, and it is impossible to affirm that Balaam's suggestive emblems portray and forecast it, impossible to assert that their buckets habitually streamed with the fair sweet waters of abundance, or that they shewed either a strength like that of the buffalo, eating up the nations round about them, or the fierce victorious courage of the lion and the lioness when they hunt or when they crouch over and defend their prey. Yet Balaam was inspired to use these emblems; it was the Spirit of God that came upon him and moved him to utter predictions which no candid reader of the Hebrew story can confidently affirm to have been fulfilled in the exact literal sense in which they were uttered and understood.

What shall we say to these things, then? Shall we shuffle and equivocate, and say that Balaam's words had a sufficient fulfilment in the brief period of national glory under David and Solomon, when it is plain that the Prophet intended them to apply to and

characterize the whole career of Israel, or that, if he had any special period in his eye, it must have been the immediate future? Or must we sorrowfully admit that God was not as good as his word, and only kept his promise to the ear, to break it to the hope?

Before we impale ourselves on either horn of that dismal dilemma, let us at least ask whether it is not our theory of Inspiration, our notion of what really made a man a prophet, which is at fault. In my judgment it is gravely at fault if it has taught us to insist on infallibility as an invariable adjunct of inspiration, or to find the chief function of the prophet in his ability to predict the future, to trace and interpret the shadows which coming events cast before them. That which really constitutes a man a prophet is not so much *foresight* as *insight*—insight into the ways of God with men. Dr Robertson Smith goes so far as to say[1] that "the possession of a single true thought about Jehovah, not derived from current religious teaching, but springing up in the soul as a word from Jehovah Himself, is enough to constitute a prophet, and lay on him the duty of speaking to Israel what he has learned from Israel's God." And all who have studied the subject admit, I believe, so much as this,—that the chief function of the prophet

[1] "The Prophets of Israel," p. 182.

is to grasp the great moral principles on which God governs the world, and so to master them as to be able to apply them to the special conditions of men and of races of men. No doubt a profound insight into these principles involves some degree of foresight, and enables a man to predict what the issue of a certain course of action must be,—just as some of us, simply because we believe in the moral government of the world, foretold, even when the third Napoleon seemed to be the greatest political force in Europe, that his empire must speedily crumble into dust; just as we now predict that the vast and despotic military and bureaucratic systems which are pressing the very life out of many of the nations of the Continent must soon be broken up, or that Ireland will never be well governed until Irishmen have learned to govern themselves. But this foresight springs from insight, and rests upon it. And many a prophet has laid a firm grasp on the moral principles of the Divine Government, and has been able to say without doubt or hesitation that, if men pursue a certain course, they must infallibly reach a certain end, who yet has not been able to read with perfect accuracy what the moral conditions of men were, or to foresee the moral changes through which they would pass. Fallible and mistaken in these inferior points a man may be, and yet remain a most true prophet if only he has

mastered the moral principles by which the world is ruled, and can see that obedience to them must lead to prosperity and peace, while disobedience inevitably entails adversity and strife.

There is an illustration of this point in the Bible which seems to have been "written large" in order that we might not fail to mark the limits of the prophetic power. Jonah's famous prediction, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown:" was *that* fulfilled or was it *not* fulfilled? The message undoubtedly came from God; and God took some pains, it has been commonly thought, to ensure its faithful delivery. Jonah disliked both his mission, and the upshot of his mission; but he was compelled to go upon it. Did God, then, keep the word He spoke by the reluctant lips of Jonah, or did He not keep it? Those who think, as Jonah seems to have thought, that prediction is the chief work of a prophet, and that his crowning honour is to have his prediction verified in every jot and tittle, must of course admit that, on this occasion at least, God did shew himself to be like a man who lies or a son of man who repents. But for us, who believe that the main function of the prophet is to declare the moral principles which determine the fate of men and nations, Jonah's insight into these principles was far more gloriously vindicated, and the word of God was

far more profoundly fulfilled, in the salvation of Nineveh than it would have been in its destruction. What Jonah saw was that it is righteousness—not wealth, not culture even, nor military organization—which redeems and exalts a nation, while wickedness dooms and destroys it. And when he had taught that great moral principle to a vast and populous city, so taught it that all the inhabitants of that city "turned every one from his evil way," repenting of and renouncing the wickedness which was destroying him, was not his principle verified, his mission vindicated, to the uttermost? was not God the more abundantly glorified? did not the prophet, if only he could have seen it, win a veritable and transcendent victory?

In like manner Balaam had grasped the principle that a righteous life infallibly conducts men to the true prosperity and peace. It is this principle, this conviction, which underlies the glowing imagery of his Oracles and gives them force. Was it not a true principle, a principle on which we see God acting along the whole course of human history? In grasping and fearlessly announcing this principle, which the superficial current of events so often seems to contradict, so often conceals therefore from the carnal and inobservant eye, he proved himself to be a genuine prophet, a man really taught and inspired of God.

In applying this principle, however, he may, since inspiration does not necessarily carry infallibility with it, have fallen into errors of detail. It may have been—I think it was—the ideal, not the actual, Israel which he saw in his visions from the Almighty, for it was on this ideal Israel that most of the prophets fixed their eyes. And hence he describes them as a people dwelling apart from other nations in an unapproachable, an unassailable, sanctity, obeying purer laws, pursuing higher aims, and even affirms that there is no distress in Israel because *no iniquity* is to be descried in Jacob. In so far as the actual Israel rose toward this fair and blameless ideal, they did enjoy the very blessings of abundance, victory, peace, which Balaam so lavishly promised them, as every page of their subsequent history testifies; while in so far as they fell away from this ideal, blended with the nations from whom they ought to have dwelt apart, fell back on the idolatries of their Syrian fathers or gave place to the current iniquities of their age and of neighbouring races, they lost the blessings promised to righteousness, and reaped the distress and impotence of which wickedness is the natural root.

If, then, it be the main function of the prophet to grasp and apply great moral principles, we may say with perfect honesty and candour that Balaam's

oracles were more truly and profoundly verified than if every letter of his forecasts had come true. The chronicles of Israel are but an expanded commentary on the ethical principles which he laid down,—as, indeed, are the chronicles of every nation if only we had wit and grace to read them aright, or even the history of every individual man. For we must not fail to observe that in this canon of interpretation, which is a key to all the prophecies of Holy Writ, we have also the key to the mysteries of our individual experience and fate. Whether in the story of a man or of a race, Righteousness is the true redeeming and uplifting power; Unrighteousness the secret of all miseries, adversities, and distresses. And it is only as we grasp and obey the righteous laws on which the universe is ruled, and by which therefore our individual lot is shaped, that we can become either true prophets or true men, and rejoice in the abundance of peace.

Fourth Oracle.

Balaam's *Fourth Oracle* is a series of prophetic utterances rather than the development of a single theme such as we have heard from him heretofore. It deals successively with the fate of Israel, Moab, Edom, Amalek, the Kenites, the Assyrians, and

perhaps even with that of the Macedonians. It is divided into sections by the phrase, "And he took up his parable and said;" and is united only by the fact that the career and prospects of the other races of which it treats are viewed purely in their relation to the history and destiny of the chosen people.

Naturally, therefore, and of necessity, by virtue of the motive which prompted it and the intention with which it is fraught, the *predictive* element is far more dominant and conspicuous in this Fourth Oracle[1] than in any of those which we have already considered, although, as we have seen, the predictive is by no means the highest element in prophecy. Here we have clearly defined forecasts, forecasts which project their long shadows through century after century, forecasts which, if not justified by the event, must recoil with discredit on the head of the prophet who utters them. The fate of no less than six well-known Oriental races is involved in them, and of four of these races there was, so far as we can see, not the slightest necessity that Balaam should speak. He needlessly multiplies his difficulties, therefore, if he were not a true prophet, and himself places in our

[1] It will not be necessary, therefore, from our point of view, to discuss this Oracle at any length, though there is much in it to engage the attention of the commentator and historian, since, being mainly predictive, it throws comparatively little light on the character of the man.

hands means for his detection and disgrace, with a confidence which we cannot but admire, or a recklessness which proves him to have been beyond the reach of shame.

The whole Oracle, indeed, is volunteered, and seems even to have been thrust on unwilling ears. The Prophet's mission was already discharged. Again and again he had faithfully warned the king of Moab that he had better charge the buffalo, whom even trained and daring hunters of wild beasts avoid when they may, or rouse the lion when he couches over his prey, than assail the people whom the Lord had blessed. The warning had moved Balak to an impotent anger which, since he feared to vent it in violence, lest Balaam might return a curse for a blow—and he knew that whom Balaam cursed *was* cursed—found such poor relief and expression as could be obtained by smiting his hands together, and in breathing out rude sarcasms on the scrupulous piety with which the Prophet served a Lord who held him back from honour and reward.[1] Unmoved alike by the irony and the anger of the King, or moved only to the pity and awe of one who sees a headstrong man rushing on his fate, the Prophet accepts his dismissal, and replies only that, before he departs he will "advertise," or "advise," Balak "what this people shall do to thy

[1] Chapter xxiv. verses 10, 11.

people in later days": *i.e.*, he will tell Balak advisedly, or with a view to advice, what the ultimate relation of Israel to Moab will be, that so, with full knowledge of the final issue, the King may determine what shall be the present attitude of Moab to Israel.

With this brief exordium, he breaks into an inspired song and delivers his Oracle; of which the first section runs as follows (Chap. xxiv. verses 15-19):—

Thus sayeth Balaam, the son of Beor,
And thus saith the man whose eyes are open;
Thus sayeth he who heareth the words of God,
And knoweth the knowledge of the Most High;
He who seeth the vision of the Almighty,
Prostrate, but with opened eyes:
I see him, though he be not now;
I behold him, though he be not nigh:
There cometh a star out of Jacob,
And out of Israel there riseth a sceptre,
And smiteth in pieces both flanks of Moab,
And shattereth all the sons of tumult:
And Edom is his possession,
And Seir, his enemies,[1] is his possession,
And Israel shall do valiantly;
Jacob shall have dominion over them,
And shall destroy them that escape out of their cities.

In his Third Oracle Balaam had foretold that the king of Israel should be "higher than Agag," *i.e.*, "higher than High," higher than the most eminent

[1] *His enemies; i.e.*, both Edom and Seir=the Edomites who dwell in Seir.

prince of his time. And now, in the abrupt mysterious tones of one who strains his eyes to behold a bright but distant vision, he declares that this high victorious King, shining with the pure but remote splendour of a star, and wielding a sceptre so potent and imperial that none of "the sons of tumult," none of those who delight in war, will be able to withstand it, is not to be looked for in the immediate future, that his advent is still far off; but that, though his coming be not "nigh," he will come, and come to smite Moab in pieces on both flanks, to reduce to subjection even those inveterate foes to Israel—the Edomites, and to take possession of Mount Seir, their home and stronghold among the rocks.

Now this prediction of the Sceptre and the Star has been read in a Messianic sense both by Jewish and Christian commentators; the Jews of our Lord's time even drew from it a title for their Messiah, and called Him *Bar-Cochab*, or "the Son of the Star." And this Messianic reference is of unquestionable authority if nothing more is meant by it than that all the symbols and predictions of Hebrew royalty find their last and highest fulfilment in the Christ; and that it was very natural, therefore, that the piety of after ages should place the star on his brow and the sceptre in his hand. But if it be meant that Balaam saw the figure and day of Jesus Christ afar

off, predicted his personal advent, and consciously hailed *Him* as the Star and Sceptre of Israel, we must demur. To import these specific meanings into general terms, to isolate certain images and to interpret them in a sense alien and opposed to the main scope of the prophecy in which they are found, is to treat the most sacred of books with less respect than we accord to almost any other writing; it is to degrade the Bible into a series of arbitrary signs and perplexing conundrums which every man may read in a different sense, rather than to accept it as a revelation of Divine truth to the reason and the conscience of man.

The Star and the Sceptre are natural and common emblems of imperial splendour and power. They are used in this sense in every considerable literature in the world. And we must take them in this sense here. We pass into the region of mere speculation and conjecture if we assume Balaam to have meant anything more than that, in the dim and undetermined future, a Ruler was to arise in Israel—or, still more probably, a line of rulers, a dynasty—under whom the Hebrew race would conquer its most inveterate foes, rise to an uncontested supremacy, and exercise an unchallenged dominion over them. The Oracle itself rebukes us if we attempt to impose a more precise, or a more definitely, Messianic significance

upon it. For when did Jesus of Nazareth smite Moab on both flanks, assume Mount Seir as his possession, and destroy those who escaped out of their cities? On the other hand, taken in its natural sense, Balaam's prediction was very sufficiently fulfilled when David carried his victorious arms through Moab and Edom, shattering these and other sons of tumult with what seems to us a ferocious severity, and when, under Solomon his son, Jacob had full and unbroken dominion over them.[1]

But Balaam is not content to foretell the defeat of Edom and Moab. He looks round on the whole circle of Israel's foes, and singles out the first and fiercest of them for his next denunciation. Taking up his parable, he says (Chap. xxiv. verse 20):

> Amalek is the first of the nations,
> But his end shall be destruction.

The Amalekites were, we must remember, the great military clan of the Desert, and had recently subdued most of the adjacent clans by force of arms. They stood "first" among them all. But, from Balaam's point of view, their pre-eminence was a bad pre-eminence. For they had also been "first" in their hostility to Israel. They had attacked the Israelites almost as soon as they had broken out from the

[1] 2 Samuel viii. 2; comp. 2 Chronicles xxv. 11, 12.

Egyptian house of bondage, at the very commencement of their long pilgrimage through the wilderness,[1] and had only been discomfited and repelled after a long and hazardous conflict. They had repeated the attack forty years afterward, and had driven back the Children of Israel when they first attempted to enter the Promised Land.[2] For this unprovoked and persistent hostility Moses had solemnly devoted them to destruction; nay Jehovah Himself had said unto Moses, "I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Balaam had probably heard of the doom pronounced upon them, and now repeats and confirms it. How seriously this doom was understood in Israel, what grave importance was attached to its execution, we may infer from the fact that the prophet Samuel, nearly five hundred years after this doom was pronounced, formally commissioned Saul to destroy the Amalekites; and when Saul returned from the slaughter declaring that he had "utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword," reserving only the king, the Agag of his day, for his personal captive, the Prophet himself,[3] as one engaged in a religious service, "hewed Agag in pieces *before the Lord.*"

But Israel had friends as well as foes, and among

[1] Exodus xvii. 8-16. [2] Numbers xiv. 44-45.
[3] 1 Samuel xv. 32, 33.

these friends there were none who had served them more faithfully and efficiently than the Kenites, who seem to have derived their name either from Kain, their tribe-father, or from Kain, the city in which they dwelt. Led by Jethro, one of their prince-priests and the father-in-law of Moses, they had cast in their lot with the chosen people, guided them through the desert, in which—so the sacred historian gratefully acknowledges—they were as "eyes" to them, and had received from Moses the assurance, "What goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same will we do unto you." As they had elected to share the lot of Israel, they should share it to the end: *this* is the substance of the next section of Balaam's Oracle, which runs thus: when he looked on the Kenites, he said (Chap. xxiv. verses 21, 22),

> Strong is thy dwelling-place,
> And thy nest fixed in the crags;
> For surely Kain shall not be destroyed
> Until Asshur shall carry *thee* away captive.

The prediction is susceptible of more than one interpretation; but the most probable seems to be that which finds in it an allusion to the former home of the Kenites, and makes it declare that as they had left their inaccessible haunt amid the crags of Horeb, to attach themselves to the fortunes of Israel when Israel itself was wandering and homeless and poor,

they should be installed in a still more enduring and impregnable home now that they had placed themselves under the shield of Jehovah. In the Hebrew there is a pun on the word *ken*, or "nest," and the word from which the *Ken*ites derived their name, which gives a special prominence to the thought that the warm safe nest of this friendly race should remain unrifled and undisturbed until, so to carry out the figure, the Hebrew tree amid whose branches it was placed should itself be cut down and carried away to a strange land. In any case, on any reading, the main drift of the forecast is that the fate of the Kenites was bound up with that of the Israelites, and that they should continue to share in the good fortune of the men to whom they had committed themselves, until, at last, even these should be conquered and enslaved by the fierce and hasty Assyrians. And in this its main drift the forecast was fulfilled. The Kenites did continue in the Holy Congregation to the end, and "never wanted a man to stand before the Lord" until the Congregation itself was broken up and dispersed.[1]

With the mention of that tremendous name *Asshur*, which in after centuries came to import so much to the whole Eastern world, a still vaster and

[1] Jeremiah xxxv. 19.

more dreadful scene breaks in upon the Prophet's soul, musing on things to come; a scene in which enormous empires rise and fall; a scene of which he catches only brief glimpses indeed, and gives us only broken and indefinite outlines, but by which he himself is so profoundly moved and shaken that he opens the final section of his Oracle with a groan. "Alas," he cries (Chap. xxiv. verses 23, 24)—

> Alas! who shall live when God doeth this?
> But ships shall come from the coast of Chittim,
> And shall humble Asshur and humble Eber:—
> And *he* also shall be destroyed.

The Prophet is thus profoundly torn and moved, partly, perhaps, because he himself came from the mountains and plains of Aram, in which the great empires of Nineveh and Babylon were to take their rise and find their seat; but mainly because, as he looks forward through the years, he sees that the star of Jacob is to set and the sceptre of Israel is to be broken; that the *righteous* nation is to be overwhelmed by the powers of unrighteousness. Nay, as he gazes on the vision which passes before his eyes, he beholds storm after storm of ruin and disaster breaking on the world. Even the proud and mighty Assyrian—and Eber is here but another name for Asshur—is to be humbled and overthrown by forces borne on ships that come from, or come by, Chittim,

i.e., the isle of Cyprus (Chittim = Citium, the capital of Cyprus), by which island all ships passing from the West to the East must needs pass: a prediction very sufficiently fulfilled when the great empires of the East were overrun by the Macedonian Greeks under Philip and Alexander the Great.

Nor is even this all: but the very Power which humbles Assyria and the East is itself doomed to a similar destruction; for this, as the Hebrew syntax proves, is the force of the final line in the Oracle, "And *he* also shall be destroyed."

First he sees the Hebrews, with the faithful Kenites, carried away captive into Assyria; then he sees the mighty Assyrian empire itself humbled and brought low by a still mightier Power, of which all that he can discern is that its forces approach in ships from the West; and then even this great Power falls to pieces under a pressure too distant and vague for him to define. Is it any wonder that as he gazed on a spectacle so vast and dark his heart quaked within him, and the groan was forced from his lips, "Woe, woe! who shall live when God doeth this?" For it was not the mere terror of the spectacle which shook him, but the disorder, the lawlessness, the unreasonableness of it. There was no principle in it. He could get no clue to it. It was alien to his experience, a shock to his most cherished beliefs. For all

his beliefs were built up on the conviction that the world was governed by God, and that the Judge of all the earth must not only do right, but get right done. Yet how could it be right that the one people in whom he had descried no iniquity, and whose happy fortune he had just foretold, should be conquered and enthralled by an empire founded on injustice and mere brute force? What hope was there for mankind if the vista of the future were closed by a scene of universal ruin, nation rising after nation only to be beaten down by wave after wave of destruction? Was life worth living, was righteousness worth pursuing, if *this* were to be the end of all?

Thus, at least, *we* might have moralized had we stood in Balaam's place, and gazed into the gloomy horizon which bounded his view. And thus we are disposed to interpret his groan, "Who shall live when God doeth this?" But whether *he* meant all this, and whether this hopeless and despairing outlook in any measure detracted from his faith in the ultimate victory of righteousness and truth, and so contributed to his subsequent disloyalty to God, it is impossible for us to say. All we are told is that when the "vision from the Almighty" had faded from his soul, and his oracular lips had ceased to utter the "words he heard from God," and to convey "knowledge from the Most High," *Balaam rose up, and went away,*

and turned toward his place; and Balak also went his way. The phrase, however, does not imply—as many have taken it to imply, especially those who take pleasure in making Scripture seem to contradict itself—that the Prophet returned to his home at Pethor, among the mountains of Aram. It is a common idiom in the Hebrew, and means no more than that both he and Balak went each where he was now free to go, where he was disposed to go. At the same time, from Balaam's words in Verse 14, "And now, behold, *I go unto my people,*" it does seem probable that he left the presence of the king of Moab fully intending to bend his face homeward. If that were his intention, all that needs to be said is that, like many other men before his time and since, he changed his intention, and did not change it for the better. For from other sources we learn that, on second thoughts, he joined the Midianites, Balak's allies, with whom from the first he seems to have been more at home than with the Moabites; and that he afterwards suggested to them the vile expedient by which the men of Israel were seduced from their allegiance to Jehovah, and so brought down on them the curse which he had refused to pronounce. Nay, from the course of his subsequent history, it would seem probable that he became the recognised *vates* and counsellor of the Midianite clan, and cast in his lot

with them; as it is quite certain—unless we are to reject Scriptures quite as authentic as this Chronicle can be—that he remained with them till, in the war of vengeance against Midian which Moses commanded, this great but mean man, this true yet false prophet, was taken captive and judicially slain.

And so our Chronicle comes to a close. By its aid we have followed Balaam from his distant home in Mesopotamia, through the adventures of his long journey; we have stood with him on the mountains of Moab, as he watched "till knowledge came upon his soul like flame," and have seen his soul illuminated, not by "magic fires at random caught," but by "true prophetic light." We have stood by him as "with tranc'd yet open gaze, fixed on the desert haze," like "one who deep in heaven some airy pageant sees," he has told us how, "in outline dim and vast," "the giant forms of empires on their way to ruin" cast their awful shadows on his heart. And now we must close the Chronicle, and turn to the supplementary Scriptures which carry on the tale or indicate the character of his life, in the hope that they may throw some new light on the facts we have considered.

But already we have seen enough of him to know that, though a great man, Balaam was by no means one of the greater prophets. The very visions and

trances, in virtue of which we often ascribe greatness to him, are themselves the proof that he does not take the highest rank in the goodly fellowship. We are apt to lay too much stress on these strange and exceptional experiences, these ecstasies in which the spirit that is in man is carried out of and above itself, these visions in which the secrets of the future pass before his eye in visible form, and to attach too great an importance to them; as, indeed, we are apt to think too much of all rare and splendid mental endowments, and too little of the yet nobler moral gifts which are open to every son of man. And, therefore, we need to remember that as in the New Testament St Paul lays down the canon, that self-consciousness and self-control are never lost by the true prophet, so also the great prophets of the Old Testament never paraded their ecstasies before their fellows, never appealed to visions and trances as authenticating their inspiration or augmenting their authority.[1] By their self-possession, by the sobriety of their bearing, no less than by the truth and power of their words, they are clearly marked off from the whole tribe of heathen soothsayers and diviners, and of the ministrants at Oracular shrines, who were held to be under the influence of the god in proportion as they lost composure and self-control. In the very

[1] Cf. "The Prophets of Israel," By W. Robertson Smith.

Book of Numbers,[1] too, Jehovah Himself is represented as thus discriminating between the higher and inferior orders even of prophets who are genuinely inspired: "If there be a prophet among you" (*i.e.*, among the Children of Israel, who then possessed, as we know, no prophet of any great mark save Moses), "I, the Lord, do make myself known unto him *in a vision*, and do speak unto him *in a dream*. My servant Moses is *not so*, who is faithful in all My house. With *him* I speak mouth to mouth, even visibly, and not in dark speeches, and the similitude of the Lord doth he behold." Faithful service in God's house, then, and fellowship of spirit and aim with Him, are far higher gifts than prophetic dreams and trances, ecstasies and visions; and these are open to us all: they are gifts which all who ask may have, which all who seek may find. For what is there, save our own unwillingness, to hinder any one of us from seeing and serving God in all we do? what is there, save our own worldliness and selfishness, to prevent any one of us from a constant and growing communion with Him, and an ever-augmenting knowledge of his will? For all lowly, but faithful and loving, souls there is immense comfort in St Paul's words: "Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, . . . but have not charity, I am nothing."

[1] Numbers xii. 6-8.

PART II.

THE SUPPLEMENTARY SCRIPTURES.

We have now studied the Chronicle from end to end; and if it has not thrown so much new light on the character of Balaam as we had hoped to gain from it, it must at least have served to sharpen and define our conceptions of the man, and so to set the problem of his character more fairly before us. And as we now turn to the Scriptures concerning him which lie outside this Chronicle, I do not see how we can better prepare ourselves for studying them than by summing up, in a few brief sentences, the impression which the Chronicle itself has left upon us.

Upon the whole, then, I think it has left a very favourable impression. In its earlier sections, indeed, we found some faint hints that Balaam wanted, that at least he was quite willing, to curse the people whom he was compelled to bless; and that if he loved righteousness, he also loved the wages of unrighteousness: while his loud and frequent vaunts of loyalty to the Divine Will suggested that an obedience which protested so much might not be altogether beyond suspicion. In his conferences with the ambassadors

of Balak, he seemed to be letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would"; while in his journey to Moab, and above all in his adventure with the Angel and the Ass, we saw only too much reason to fear that "I would" was beginning to get the better of "I dare not," and that he was plotting how to gratify Balak without openly rebelling against Jehovah. But from this point onwards, from the moment in which the dumb ass rebuked the madness of the Prophet, we found nothing to allege against him, but much to approve and admire. In all his intercourse with Balak he shewed "an incorrigible and losing honesty," a veracity, a fidelity to the words which the Lord had put into his mouth that never wavered, although it would have been easy for him to palter with words in a double sense, and to utter oracles as musical in the ear of his listeners, and as false to the hopes which they inspired, as were many of those which proceeded from the shrines of Delphi and Dodona.

His last oracle has little value for us save as it proves him to have been a veritable seer, able to penetrate the future and foretell things to come. Here he utters definite forecasts, which project into a far-distant future, and so gives us an opportunity to determine whether or not he was endowed with the power he claimed and was believed to possess. Israel, he says, is to conquer all its enemies, to rise into an

uncontested supremacy and exercise an unchallenged dominion over them. Edom is to be smitten on both flanks, Amalek to be destroyed. The faithful Kenites, who had attached themselves to the fortunes of Israel when Israel was destitute and helpless, are to dwell in a home still more secure than the nest in the rocks which they had left to cast in their lot with that of the chosen people. The Assyrians, who, in the remote future, are to subjugate and enthrall both the Hebrews and the Kenites, will themselves be humbled by some great Western Power; and even this Power—the Macedonian—is in its turn to be destroyed under a pressure too vague and distant for him to define. These predictions are so definite and precise that any one who cares may bring him to book upon them; and they are so far beyond the reach of that prophetic strain to which age and a wide experience of the ways of God with men sometimes attain that, if they were fulfilled—and we have seen that they *were* fulfilled—it is impossible to deny that Balaam was a true prophet even in the vulgar sense of that word, and must have received his knowledge from the Most High.

But it is in his earlier oracles that both the true character of the man and the real greatness of the prophet come out; for that which makes men good is the very quality which makes prophets great. It lies

not in foresight, but in insight; not in forecasting the exact form and pressure of the time to be, but in the power to grasp the moral order of the universe with a loyal heart. It is in the mastery of ethical principles, and not in mere intellectual capacity or illumination, that a prophet's highest glory consists. And, judged by this admitted canon, it must be confessed that in his oracles Balaam takes a high place in the goodly fellowship, though not by any means the highest. From the first of these remarkable utterances we gathered that it was *the holiness* of Israel by which he was attracted and impressed, even more than by their numbers or their power. We gathered that he had learned, what many Christian men and statesmen have not learned even yet, that Righteousness is the true strength of a nation, not wealth, nor dominion, nor culture even. It is because he sees that righteousness is the end and aim of Israel that he longs to share their ideal, to live their life, to die their death, and feels that nothing short of a life conformed to the Divine law can bring him peace at the last.

This conviction culminates in his Second Oracle, in which, therefore, we find our most solid and valuable contributions to an adequate conception of the man. For it is here that we meet with three striking sentences which should largely influence our final estimate of him, although hitherto, so far as I am

aware, no emphasis has been laid upon them. First of all he tells us that *no iniquity is to be descried in Jacob*, and that hence *no distress is to be seen in Israel*.[1] And how could he more impressively announce his persuasion that while Sin is the source of weakness and misery, Righteousness is the one source of strength, happiness, and peace, whether to a man or to a nation? Still more striking and suggestive is the sentence in which he disavows a power commonly ascribed to him, and confesses that when Jehovah has blessed he cannot *reverse* the blessing.[2] For this was precisely what a soothsayer was expected to do, what it was universally believed that he could do. What was he good for if he could not curse men who, because they were strong in wealth or power, were held to be in favour with Heaven? A soothsayer who could not control events as well as foresee them, who could not shape as well as forecast the future, who could not evade or overrule the benign intention of a god by magic arts or by calling in some higher celestial influence, was not a soothsayer at all to the vulgar, or even to the princely[3] mind of that age. And, therefore, to find a soothsayer confessing that he cannot reverse as well as predict the currents of human destiny is to find a man so frank and

[1] Numbers xxiii. 21. [2] *Ibid.* xxiii. 20.
[3] *Ibid.* xxii. 6.

honourable, so true to himself, to God, and to men, as to abjure a most potent art, an almost unrivalled power over the conduct and fortunes of his fellows, rather than trade on their superstitions and fears. Balaam never shews a more righteous and disinterested spirit than in this costly sacrifice on the altar of truth. But most striking of all is the sentence in which he ascribes the righteousness and consequent blessedness of the elect people to the fact that there was *no augury in Jacob, nor any divination in Israel;* that instead of trying, as *he* had done, to surprise or force the secrets of the future, they waited until *in due time it was told to Israel what God doeth.*[1] For this was to contemn the very gift of which he had been most proud. It was to confess that the main study and aim of his life had been one which rather diverted him from a righteous and patient obedience to the will of God than conducted him to it. No more remarkable confession ever fell from a diviner's lips than this censure on the art of divination; and in making it Balaam rose into a far higher and nobler mood than when, with tranced but open eye, he saw visions from the Almighty, and there fell upon his inward ear words from God.

In his Third Oracle, although in delivering it he seems to have been more utterly possessed by the

[1] Numbers xxiii. 23.

Divine afflatus than before, and though the Spirit of God *came* upon him with overmastering force, Balaam simply repeats, and repeats in the same figures and phrases he had previously employed, his old affirmation that Righteousness, and Righteousness alone, is the secret of strength and peace. He does not now so much as go out to look for auguries. God has shewn him his will, and that is enough; no omen could persuade him of any change in that high and constant Will. He is content to re-affirm the truth he has already affirmed; only now he is more sure of it than ever, puts his whole soul into the affirmation of it, and is more profoundly conscious that he has "the mind of the Spirit" in declaring that Righteousness is the one power which redeems and uplifts men, unrighteousness the secret and cause of all their miseries.

These are the more notable and significant results of our study of the Chronicle of Balaam, and on the whole the Scriptures which lie outside it do but expand the hints and develop the germs of character which we have found in the Chronicle itself; though it must be acknowledged that, while one of them lends new lustre to the loftier aspects of the man, most of them add to its baser aspects shades so dark and repulsive as to explain why his character has been regarded as a well-nigh insoluble enigma.

I. Let us take the *adverse* Scriptures first, the Scriptures which darken and degrade our conception of him.

(1) We have gathered from the Chronicle that Balaam *wanted*, or at best was quite willing, *to curse Israel*. The faint hints and suggestions of this evil bent and disposition of his mind which the Chronicle contains would not, however, have counted for much. We might have doubted our construction of them had they not been confirmed in the most explicit way, in the most damning sense, by at least three passages of Holy Writ. Thus in Deuteronomy xxiii. 4, 5, we read that no Moabite was to be admitted into the congregation of Israel, "because they met you not with bread and with water in the way when ye came forth out of Egypt; and because they *hired* Balaam, the son of Beor . . . to curse thee. Nevertheless the Lord thy God *would not hearken unto Balaam*, but the Lord thy God *turned the curse into a blessing* because He loved thee." Of the implication of these words there can be little doubt. Read sincerely, without any prejudice for or against the man, they surely charge Balaam with having endeavoured to extort the consent of Jehovah to a curse he was eager to pronounce; while they ascribe it purely to the love of Jehovah for Israel that He would not hearken to the prayers of Balaam, but turned the

curse he would have willingly uttered into a blessing he was reluctant to pronounce. It seems impossible to infer less from them than this: that had Balaam been left to follow his own impulse, to take his own course, it was anything but a benediction which he would have pronounced over the camp of Israel, and that the spirit of the hireling contended in his breast with the spirit of the prophet.

This implication is still further confirmed by two subsequent passages. In his last pathetic appeal to the tribes of Israel, Joshua sought to rekindle their fidelity to Jehovah by recounting the mercies of the Lord and the wonders He had shewed them; and in recounting these wonders of mercy he reminds them of an interposition which some of them could hardly have forgotten. He says (Joshua xxiv. 9, 10): "Then Balak, the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and warred against Israel, and sent and called Balaam, the son of Beor, to curse you: but *I would not hearken to Balaam; therefore* he blessed you still: so I delivered you out of his hand." And in Nehemiah xiii. 1, 2, we are told that on a certain day there was read to the Jews who had returned from the Captivity that passage from Deuteronomy cited in the last paragraph; "wherein was found that the Ammonite and the Moabite should not come into the congregation of God for ever, because they met

not the children of Israel with bread and with water, *but hired Balaam against them that he should curse them: howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing.*" When they had heard this sentence from "the Book of Moses," adds Nehemiah, they instantly separated themselves from the mixed multitude which had crept into the Congregation.

We may fairly say, therefore, that not only is Balaam branded as a hireling by these supplementary Scriptures, and charged with having wished, and even tried, to curse the seed of Abraham; but that this conviction both of his cupidity and of his hostility to Israel was the standing and dominant conviction of the Jews concerning him for more than a thousand years.

(2) We found in the Chronicle some reason to fear that Balaam had respect to reward, that he hankered after a house full of silver and gold; that, if he loved righteousness, he also loved the wages of unrighteousness. And this fear has been confirmed by the passages just cited in which he is stigmatized as a hireling. But, unhappily, there are other Scriptures which, if we accept them as inspired, or even as bearing honest witness to historic facts, put this point, this gross and heavy fault, beyond the reach of doubt. In the so-called Second Epistle of St Peter (Chap. ii. 15, 16), for example, certain "children of a curse"

are spoken of as having forsaken the path of righteousness to go astray, "following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, *who loved the hire of wrongdoing*, but was *rebuked for his transgression :* a dumb ass spoke with man's voice, and stayed the madness of the prophet." I am not unmindful of the questionable authority of this Epistle. For three centuries after it was written it was excluded from the Sacred Canon ; and probably enough it may be cast out from the Canon ere long, at least by those who walk by the faith which demands evidence for things not seen rather than by that which is the substance of things hoped for. But no scholar will deny that it is a very ancient document, or that it follows an accepted Jewish tradition in the charge it alleges against the son of Beor. On the other hand, we must cheerfully admit that St Peter, or the *falsarius* who writes in his name, accords the sacred title of "prophet" to Balaam even while he charges him with that love of money which is a root of all evil ; and even goes so far as to call his wrong-doing a "madness," a craze discordant with his general character, of which he could hardly have been guilty had not his true nature been jangled and out of tune. Doubtful as may be the authority of this Scripture, therefore, we may say that it sums up, with some fairness, nearly all that we know of the man, neither concealing the good that was in him nor extenuating that which was evil.

Even the severest criticism, however, can find little of any weight to allege against the authenticity of the Epistle of St Jude; and in this Epistle (Verse 11) it is said of those who revile whatsoever things they know not, "Woe unto them! for they went in the way of Cain, *and ran riotously in the error of Balaam for hire.*" St Jude, therefore, not only brings the old charge against Balaam and ascribes to him a mercenary spirit, a willingness to let out his art of divination on hire; he also anticipates our next point, and implies in him a certain sensuality of spirit. For in this verse, "Lust stands hard by hate." Cain is here the emblem of fierce and cruel hate, say the critics; Balaam that of carnal indulgence: those who ran riotously in his error being men—and even in the Christian Church there have always been men, the Antinomians to wit, that have turned the grace of God into licentiousness—who made their piety a cloak for sensual depravity, and blackened the very name of Religion by the immoralities which they held it to justify or condone. The reference may be only to that vile expedient which Balaam counselled, and by which, as we are about to see, the men of Israel were lured into the flagrant orgies of Baalpeor; yet surely that was an expedient which it could never have occurred to any man of pure heart or pure life to advise.

(3) For the next allegation which Scripture brings against him is perhaps the worst of all. The very Chapter (xxv.) which follows the Chronicle in the Book of Numbers tells the sad and shameful story of how the fair women of Midian came down to the camp of Israel, and tempted the men of Israel to join in the licentious rites by which Baalpeor was worshipped; and how, for this sin, the anger of the Lord was kindled so that He sent a plague upon them, and "those that died of the plague were twenty and four thousand;" but it in no way connects the name of Balaam either with the sin or its punishment. Probably it was not known at the time that it was he who had dug this pit for their feet. But in a subsequent Chapter (Numbers xxxi. 16) the dismal secret is disclosed, and the whole guilt of this foul device is fastened upon him: for, in the war of vengeance against Midian, Moses commanded that even the women should be slain, "because they caused the children of Israel, *through the counsel of Balaam,* to commit impurity against the Lord in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the Lord." To those who bow to the authority of Scripture a charge so plainly made needs no confirmation; yet it is confirmed in the most explicit terms, and on an authority no less than that of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself:

for in the epistle which he sent to the Church at Pergamos by his servant John (Revelation ii. 14), He sharply rebukes as many as "held the teaching of *Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication.*"[1]

So that, despite his splendid fidelity to the words which God put into his mouth, and his utter refusal to curse the people whom God had blessed, he did curse them most effectually after all, by a deed which spoke louder than any words. "The expedient he pitched upon," says Bishop Butler, "was that concerning which Solomon afterwards observed that it had *cast down many wounded, yea, many strong men had been slain by it,* and of which he himself was a sad example when *his wives turned away his heart after other gods.*" And so moved is the good bishop, whose mind was as a rule singularly thoughtful and composed, by so foul and sordid a sin in a man otherwise so noble and great, that, after relating it, he breaks out into the exclamation, "Great God, what inconsistency, what perplexity is here!" And, indeed, the sin was so vile, and the tragedy which avenged it so terrible, that we find more than one echo of it even in the later prophets. Hosea, for instance (Chap. ix. 10), "dwells with special interest

[1] Comp. 1 Corinthians x. 8.

on the first love of Jehovah to his people when He found Israel like grapes in the wilderness, when He knew them in the thirsty desert, *before the innocence of the nation's childhood was stained with the guilt of Baalpeor,*" and "they separated themselves unto Shame" (a prophetic synonym for Peor), and became as "abominable" as the god they served: while Isaiah (Chap. ix. 4) caught and reproduced the thunders of the "day of Midian," on which God took vengeance on the sensual race by which that early innocence was debauched.[1]

It is when we bring together such passages as these that we begin to comprehend the bitter and unsparing indignation with which the Bible, and especially the New Testament, glows against the Prophet of Pethor, speaking of him with a severity utterly unlike to the benign generosity of most of its verdicts on human character even when the character of which it speaks is of no singular or remarkable excellence. His sins were as sordid, as base, as foul, as his virtues were eminent and his endowments rare; and they suffer by force of contrast. That a good man should be so bad, and a great man so mean, this is the wonder, this the shame. For great gifts entail grave responsibilities, and rare

[1] Unless, indeed, with some commentators, we find in this "day of Midian" a reference to the story told in Judges vii.

virtues should raise a man above vulgar temptations. The Bible is always, and justly, severe on those who pervert high gifts to base uses, and prostitute the very credit of Virtue in the service of vice. Balaam's great sin was that, knowing and loving the right, he nevertheless did wrong. He sinned, not simply against an external law and an external authority, but against the God within him: for while he had, and boasted that he had, the Spirit of God, and that in a measure in which few men of his time possessed it, he forgot that it was a Spirit of holiness and charity as well as a Spirit of wisdom and knowledge. He sinned against the Holy Ghost: and this sin against the Holy Ghost is the one unpardonable sin—unpardonable at least in this world, since it is incorrigible by any discipline which this world affords.

I do not deny that there may have been palliations of his guilt of which the Divine Mercy took note, or that that Mercy may long since have recovered him to a more steadfast and victorious pursuit of righteousness; "for to this end was the gospel (of that Mercy) preached even unto the dead,—that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit."[1] And even we, who are apt to be as unmerciful in our judgment of our fellows as though we stood in no need of mercy for

[1] 1 Peter iv. 6.

ourselves, know by observation, if not also by experience, that violent spiritual excitements react dangerously upon the soul, inducing a torpor of its higher faculties, and leaving it perilously open to temptations from the flesh: and therefore we can admit that, after the strain of over-powering inspiration, the trances and ecstasies in which Balaam saw his visions from the Almighty and delivered the oracles of the Most High, he may have yielded to temptations which he would have resisted in moods less morbid, less agitated and depressed; for it is one of the profoundest yet most patent mysteries of our nature that, when the Spirit of God departs from us, an evil spirit is only too likely to usurp his seat, and, alas! to find it ready swept and garnished for him. We confess, too, that the moment in which the main ambition of a life breaks down is a moment at which a man is prone to sink into despair; and that, in his despair, he may be so transported from himself as to be wholly unlike himself: and hence we can understand that if, as seems probable, Balaam had fondly cherished an ambition to abandon his recluse life, to mingle with men, and to become the honoured counsellor of a king or a clan, the sudden failure of this ambition may, for a time at least, have led him to hate the very virtues to which his failure was due, and to lift the yoke from passions which he had hitherto held

in check. And we can also understand that his faith in the moral government of the world may have been perilously shaken when he foresaw, as in his last vision he did foresee, that even the people Jehovah had blessed, even the one race in which he could descry no sin, the unique nation which lived for righteousness, was ultimately to be carried away captive, and to share the fate of empires founded on rapine and maintained by blood.

All this we can understand and allow for; all this we are bound to make allowance for; but, allow for it as we will, the unsophisticated conscience of every candid man must surely condemn Balaam as a sinner beyond others, and pronounce his guilt to be as rare and strange as his virtues and his gifts. Our one hope for him lies in the fact that he suffered for his sin in the flesh, that he received the punishment of it here and now, and was not permitted to add to his guilt by flaunting it in the face of the sun. Of all fates that can befall a transgressor the worst is the impunity which makes him bold in transgression. And from this fate Balaam was mercifully spared. For, in the war of vengeance against Midian, he was taken captive by the warriors of Israel, together with the kings or sheikhs of that clan, tried, and condemned to a judicial death (Numbers xxxi. 8, in the Hebrew, and Joshua xiii. 22). "Justice did not suffer him to

live." He was taken in the trap he had set for others, and fell into the pit which he himself had digged,—making by his death, let us hope, such poor atonement as was still possible for his crime against God and man.

Sins so sordid, base, and foul as those which we have now seen brought home to him compose a terrible indictment against the Prophet in whom we have found so much to admire,—inspirations so lofty, gifts so rare, and a loyalty to the words which God put into his mouth so disinterested and steadfast. As we ponder the indictment and dwell upon its counts, we may be tempted to forget his redeeming virtues, the qualities which we have admired in him and approved. But the Bible will not suffer us to do him this injustice; for among these supplementary Scriptures there is one which not only confirms all the good impressions of him which we have derived from the Chronicle, but raises him even higher in our thoughts. It is the passage which we are now to consider. In Micah vi. 5-8, we read: "*O my people, remember now what Balak king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam, the son of Beor, answered him,* from Shittim to Gilgal,[1] *that ye may discern the righteous acts of the Lord.*

[1] Ewald conjectures with much probability that "from Shittim to Gilgal" is a marginal note which has crept into the text.

[Balak loquitur.] *Wherewith shall I come to meet the Lord, and bow myself before the God of the high place? Shall I come to meet him with burnt-offerings, with yearling calves? Will the Lord take pleasure in thousands of rams, in myriads of rivers of oil? Shall I give up my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*

[Balaam loquitur.] *He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"*

There seems no reason to doubt that in these verses we have a colloquy which actually took place between the king of Moab and the prophet of Pethor, although the Chronicle contains no report of it. But as it has been questioned by at least one English scholar of distinction (Cheyne *in loco*), who, however, does not allege any argument in favour of his conclusion, it is necessary that we should glance at the reasons on which we rely in assuming that we are indebted to Micah for a scrap of ancient history which, but for him, we should have lost. In brief, these reasons are as follows:—

(1) The weight of authority is on our side. The literary instincts and spiritual insight of such men as Bishop Butler, F. D. Maurice, Cardinal Newman, Robertson of Brighton, and Dean Stanley, especially

when backed by the verdict of critics so learned and accomplished as Ewald and Kalisch, are not to be lightly over-ridden; and all these take this passage as reporting a conversation between Balak and Balaam.

(2) It is admitted all round that the verse which introduces this passage (Verse 5) is patient of the construction we put upon it, and lends itself more easily and naturally to it than to any other. When we are told of what Balak *consulted,* and how Balaam *answered* him, we naturally expect to find in the verses that follow some account of the question and its reply: and in these following verses there is a personal tone (note the "O man" of Verse 8), a conversational tone, which answers to that expectation.

(3) Such supplementary Scriptures as this are common in the Bible; we have already considered a good many of them by which our conception of Balaam's character has been deepened and enlarged. And there are many similar passages. For example, it is no more wonderful that Micah should make this addition to the Chronicle than that Hosea (Chap. xii. 3, 4) should tell us that Jacob "prevailed" over the angel with whom he strove at Peniel, because "he wept and made supplication unto him," although no mention is made of his tears and supplications in the Book of Genesis; or than that the author of the first Book of Chronicles (Chap. vii. 21, 22) should relate

how certain men of Gath, while making a raid upon their cattle, came down upon the children of Ephraim in the land of Goshen, and slew them with the sword, nearly exterminating the whole tribe; and how Ephraim their father mourned for them many days, and his brethren came to comfort him; although no mention of this catastrophe is made in the Book of Exodus. It is no more wonderful than that St Paul should report how the Lord Jesus used to say (Acts xx. 35): "It is more blessed to give than to receive," although that generous maxim is not recorded in any one of our Gospels; or than that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (Chaps. v., vii.) should add so largely to our knowledge of Melchisedek, Prince of Salem, and, in Chapter xi., give many new and picturesque touches to some of the best known patriarchs and heroes of Israel.

(4) There are local touches and undesigned coincidences in this passage which fall in with our assumption and confirm it. What, for example, could be more natural than that Balak, who led the Prophet from one sacred grove on the hill-tops to another, and drenched the altars of so many high places with the blood of his sacrifices, should conceive of Jehovah as "the God *of the high place*," and anxiously inquire how He might be placated? In the Chronicle, again, Balaam speaks familiarly of leaving the sacred groves

to meet Jehovah, and of Jehovah's *coming to meet* him (Chap. xxiii. 3, 4). So familiar is the phrase with him that he abbreviates it into a technical term, and once, at least (Chap. xxiii. 15), he speaks to Balak simply of going to *meet*, leaving him to infer that it was *the Lord* whom he expected to meet, and quite sure that he would know how to take the phrase. Micah preserves this singular expression, though in the Hebrew he uses a different verb, and makes Balak ask, "Wherewith shall I *come to meet* the Lord? Shall I *come to meet* him with burnt-offerings?" Nor must we omit to note that, in this passage, Balak, king of Moab, offers even to give up his *first-born* for his transgression, the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul. For the custom of making these dreadful human sacrifices in dreadful emergencies seems to have been a Moabitish custom, and to have held its ground many centuries after Balak had left the scene. In 2 Kings iii. 26, 27, we read of a king of Moab, whose name the recently discovered "Moabitish Stone" has made familiar to many of us,—we read how *Mesha*, king of Moab, sorely bestead by the armies of Judah and Israel, not only proposed to sacrifice his first-born to the offended gods, but actually "took his eldest son, that should have reigned in his stead, and offered him for a burnt-offering upon the wall."

And (5) the speeches here ascribed to Balak and Balaam are in character with the men. There is an imperious and yet a reckless and prodigal tone in the demand that Micah puts into the mouth of the King which is quite in harmony with all we know of him. He who sent messengers to Balaam saying, "Let nothing, I beseech thee, hinder thee from coming unto me, for . . . I will do whatsoever thou shalt say"; he who pursued Heaven with fierce and pertinacious importunity from altar to altar and hill to hill; he who, even after he had smitten his hands together in impotent anger, and had cried out on the Prophet, "Thou shalt never curse them again nor bless them again!" could yet command and beseech him to make one more attempt to wring a curse from the reluctant Power on high—may well have huddled one desperate offer and demand on the top of another as Micah makes him do. While Balaam, who loved and admired righteousness, who was true to the words he received from God at all risks and all costs, who was simply fascinated by the holiness of Israel and longed to share their lot, live their life, die their death, and who knew that it was to their comparative sinlessness they owed their strength and their peace, was surely not unlikely to have conceived such an ideal of righteousness as Micah here attributes to him.

For all these reasons, then,[1] reasons which, when combined, form an argument, I think, of irresistible cogency, we may take this passage as supplementing the story contained in the Chronicle, as preserving a colloquy between Balak and Balaam which, but for Micah, would have remained unknown to us.

The exact point in the Chronicle in which we are to insert this colloquy is not easy to determine. Dean Stanley thought that Balak *saluted* Balaam with this question when he first met him on the border of Moab. And it may have been so. It may be that in his eagerness to receive supernatural help against his dreaded foe, the King, who had pledged himself to do whatever the Prophet should demand, may have offered to go all lengths in order to secure the interposition he craved. But there is a tone of desperation in his question which, to my mind, accords better with the assumption that it was at the *close* of his interview with the Prophet, rather than at its commencement, that the baffled monarch grew so excited and so profuse. In Micah's sketch of him he has the look and bearing of one who snatches at a last and fatal expedient, of one well nigh driven to despair. Thrice already, and on three several heights, he had offered

[1] For the opposite conclusion Mr Cheyne alleges nothing but the assumption that those who see in this passage Balak's question and Balaam's reply, have "probably not realised the amount of personification which exists in the prophetic writings."

oxen and rams in the hope that he might propitiate the strange God whom Balaam served, and of whom he seems to have conceived as Himself but a celestial Balaam, who might be lured to change his mind by bribes, if only the bribe were large enough and cunningly adapted to his special bent. And thrice his bribes, his sacrifices, had been rejected, and a blessing had been uttered instead of the hoped for curse. Was there nothing more that he could do? no other expedient that he could try? Would more and more abundant burnt-offerings avail? If not, would flocks of rams by the thousand and rivers of oil by the ten thousand? If not, would even the last and dearest and most dreadful sacrifice of all avail—shall I give *my first-born* for my transgression, the fruit of my body, the hope of my dynasty, the flower of my stem, for the sin of my soul? The man was maddened with disappointment, with a vague and nameless fear, with cruel anxiety and still more cruel suspense. The dread lest his power should be broken, his name blotted out, his fair cities ravaged, his tribe destroyed, drove him out of and beyond himself; and in his momentary exaltation no sacrifice seemed too costly by which the dark and awful doom which brooded over him might be averted.

And surely we may say that as the Lord had opened the mouth of a dumb ass to rebuke the

madness of the Prophet, so now he opened the mouth of the Prophet to rebuke the madness of the King. It was not inevitable that Moab and Israel should come into conflict. Let the King be just and fear not. It was not bribes nor offerings that God required of him; but only that he should walk quietly and sincerely by conscience, by the inward light, and faithfully discharge the plain moral duties which all men recognize and approve.

Nothing can be finer than the Prophet's reply, whether in spirit or in form:—"*He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good: and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*" Nothing could more perfectly express that profound belief in Righteousness which, as we have seen again and again, was a characteristic of Balaam, or shew more impressively how pure, simple, and large his ideal of Righteousness was.

And yet, though this ideal is one which may be reached by any man who trusts and obeys the finer instincts of the soul and discerns the moral significance of the relations in which he stands, how wonderful it was that a heathen diviner of that distant time should have risen to an ideal so pure and lofty! A thousand years before the philosophers of Athens had begun to inquire after "the first fair" and "the first good,"

this unknown Prophet of an obscure race flashes into sight for a moment, and, lo, he has not asked the question only, but gained an answer to it which the accumulated experience and discoveries of subsequent centuries has but confirmed! Such wisdom was not then to be found, no, not even in Israel itself, nor for centuries afterward. Now and then, indeed, in after years, a few of the noblest and most penetrating minds in Israel caught glimpses of the truth proclaimed by Balaam. Samuel, for instance, saw and said that "to obey was better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." David affirmed that the sacrifices of God are not bullocks and goats, but a broken spirit and a contrite heart. And most of the later prophets maintained that to keep the commandments of God was better than to lavish hecatombs on his altar. But *the people* of Israel never accepted this Divine message; as, indeed, how should they when the very prophets who exalted obedience above offerings, and mercy above sacrifice, were nevertheless very zealous for the service of the altar and the temple? It was not till Christ came that ritualism was superseded by morality, and men really learned that pure and undefiled worship before God our Father is to minister to the afflicted and to keep themselves unspotted by the world. But since He came and dwelt among us the lesson has been

learned, though it has been often forgotten; and the wisest of our own day, even though they permit themselves to speak of the Scriptures of life as "Hebrew old clothes," or "faded Jewish stars," still tell us, by life as well as by pen, that to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, is the whole duty and chief good of man.

In placing obedience above ordinances, then, character before worship, right-doing before ritualism, Balaam anticipated the teaching of Christ Himself; and even a Carlyle, though taught by Christ, was no wiser than he: and so prophet touches hand with prophet across an interval of four thousand years. The truth he taught is indeed one "which all the ages tell;" it is commended to us by philosopher as well as saint, by the most modern as well as by the most ancient wisdom; and yet it needs no commendation, since it at once commends itself to our best and purest instincts.

Obedience is better than worship, nay, *is* the true worship; all ordinances of outward service were intended to cherish and express this inward obedience, and are valuable only as they help to confirm us in our obedience to the will of God; God requires of us nothing more than the justice, the compassion, the humility which our own reason and conscience require of us, so that God's requisition on us is, after all, only

our own requisition on ourselves,—in all these ways, and many more, we may state the truth anticipated by Balaam so many centuries ago.

No doubt it is a truth which cuts up all mere ritualism, sacramentarianism, sacerdotalism, by the root. Priests, sacraments, rites, are of use and fulfil their end only in so far as they teach and subserve a pure and noble morality. When once they are loved and venerated for their own sake; when once they are held to be the vital substance or the main part of Religion; and, much more, when they are made a substitute for Morality or are exalted above it, they become hateful to God and injurious to men. For what the Lord our God requires of us is not that we should reverence and obey a priest, take sacraments, observe rites; but that we should act with justice, shew mercy, and walk humbly with Him. What He requires of us is not even that we should attend the services of the Church, or read our Bibles, or assent to Creeds; all these are simply of no use to us save as they help to cherish in us a lowly spirit and a merciful heart, and to make our life righteous and kindly and pure.

On the other hand, we must be on our guard against the error of those who, when once they grasp the truth that real Religion is of the inward life, and does not consist in the observance of outward rites and

forms, feel as if they were relieved from all the burden and strain of Religion, and address themselves to what they take to be an easier course with a light heart. To them, the words of Balaam come with all the force of an enfranchisement. Their feeling is, "We may fling off all these tedious and binding forms, then. We need observe no rite, attend no service, take no sacrament, join in no worship. We have nothing to do but to live a just, kindly, and reverent life!" Ah, but what a *But* is there! Have they at all considered what it is to which they so lightly address themselves?

That we should do justly is a reasonable as well as a Divine demand; for it is a demand which our own reason and conscience make upon us. But how much is involved in it? how hard, how all but impossible, is it for even the best of men to meet it? To do justly is to render to every man his due. It covers all our domestic, social, and political relations, and demands that in every one of these we should do the thing that is right. And we do not need a large experience to discover how difficult it is, in the complex and often conflicting claims to which we lie open, so much as to know what justice requires of us; and how much more difficult it is to *do* it in the teeth of our natural indolence, cupidity, and selfishness.

To love and shew mercy, again, is as reasonable as

to do justice; for we ourselves constantly stand in need of the sympathy and compassion of our fellows, and are bound to shew to them the mercy that we need from them. But let any man set himself to keep this reasonable precept, and it will not be long before he discovers how hard it is to shew men a pity which shall not alienate or offend them; how hard it is to do an effective kindness even to one neighbour, and how doubly hard so to do it as not to injure either him or *his* neighbour. Nothing takes more wisdom than to exercise a charity which shall neither hurt nor degrade the man who receives it; and even if we do him no harm, we may only too easily be doing harm to others by seeming to slight them, or by breeding in them a craving or a pauperized spirit. And all this while I am assuming that we are *willing* to deal gently and kindly with our fellows, to pity, forgive, and assist them. Yet there are but few of us who are willing to shew mercy and forgive when once our self-love has been wounded, or our angry and revengeful passions have been aroused. In fine, it is difficult to say which is the harder, to shew mercy and to forgive from the heart, or to forgive and help so wisely and graciously as to do good rather than harm.

Nothing, again, can be more reasonable than that we should walk humbly with God. Our life is itself a mystery, open to all the accidents of pain, misfortune,

sorrow, disappointment, loss, bereavement; and it runs down into the still darker mystery of death. We pass swiftly from eternity to eternity, our immortal spirits hampered and confined in mortal frames, not knowing what may befal us from hour to hour of our brief pilgrimage, exposed to forces over which we have no control, our companions falling around us at every step, reminded at every turn of our ignorance, our weakness, our perishableness. Who should thankfully accept a Divine guidance if not we? Who should humbly acknowledge their need of a Divine support and consolation if not we, and their absolute dependence upon it? And yet how proud we are, how self-confident, how forgetful of our Divine Guide, Redeemer, Comforter! How apt to follow our own guidance or that of some leader as blind as ourselves, and to depend on our own strength or to lean on some reed as weak as ourselves, which breaks and pierces our hand so soon as we fairly commit ourselves to it!

Let no man, then, think lightly of this requisition, or lightly address himself to so great and perilous an enterprise. To do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with God, is the hardest, as it is also the noblest, of achievements. How can it be other than most hard when it summons us to nothing less than to achieve the very ideal of human life, the loftiest moral ideal which the wit of man has been able to

frame or the wisdom of God to reveal? He who would attain the true end and chief good of life *must* be prepared to endure hardness, and should be thankful for any and every help within his reach. He needs the Church; he needs the Bible; he needs the sacraments and the exercises of worship; he needs the teaching of those who have had a longer experience of time and change, of the world and men, than he himself, and of those who by special gifts or special studies are more fully acquainted with the Word and Will of God. If he is wise, so far from dispensing with any of these aids to a just, kindly, and humble spirit, he will thankfully accept and use them all.

But if the task to which we are called be hard—and who can doubt that to bend the stubborn and depraved will of man to the claims of Justice, Mercy, and Reverence, is far harder than to observe any ritual or present any sacrifice?—it is as blessed as it is hard. For, after all, nothing but justice lives and thrives in the long run, and nothing so wins upon our fellows as a kindly and sympathetic spirit; and how, amid all the shocks of change and blows of circumstance, can any man be at peace unless he humbly commit himself to the guidance of Omniscience and cast himself on the support of the Almighty? There is no rest but only here. It is as true to-day as it

was four thousand years ago, that our real wealth is within us. All else changes and passes away. Fortunes built on injustice crumble into dust. Fame won by a selfish use of power turns to disrepute. Fortress and palace and tower are even less substantial than the baseless fabric of a vision, for *that* may leave some traces of itself on an immortal mind. The whole vast pageant of human life melts away moment by moment. But the justice, the kindness, the reverence which we have cherished and made our own are beyond the reach of change, and will abide with us for ever; and he to whom it has been given to do justly, to shew mercy, to walk humbly with God, has all that even God Himself can enrich him with. For what is there really worth having that we can ask of God save that which He requires of us? Though he have nothing else, yet he hath all who, living a just, gentle, and reverent life by the grace of God, has God Himself for his guide along the dark and perplexing ways of life, God for his support, God for his eternal home and reward.

These general considerations will serve, I hope, to bring out the meaning and force of Balaam's reply to the demand of Balak, to shew how wide is its scope, how lofty and pure the ideal which it placed before the perturbed and desperate King. And if our study of it has deepened our admiration of his high

prophetic gifts, his ethical penetration and grasp, we cannot but wonder the more that the man who could conceive a moral ideal so pure and lofty should himself so miserably fall short of it. For Balaam did not do justly in so far as he loved the wages of unrighteousness; nor did *he* shew a gentle and generous spirit who, for the sake of hire, strove to curse the people he was bound to bless; nor did he walk humbly with God who, despite the Divine inspiration and command, counselled the foul expedient by which the men of Israel were drawn to transgress the law they had received by Moses. And so the whole problem, in all its mystery, comes back upon us once more; a problem which, since it is now fully stated, and we have all its terms before us, we must forthwith do our best to solve.

PART III.

THE CONCLUSION.

We have now studied all the Scriptures which relate to Balaam, and if our study has added but few new features to his character, it has served, I hope, to bring out his features more clearly, to cast higher lights and deeper shadows upon them, and to define and enlarge our conceptions both of the good and of the evil qualities of the man. The problem of his character—how a good man could be so bad and a great man so base—has not yet been solved; we are as far perhaps from its solution as ever: but something—much—has been gained if only we have the terms of that problem more distinctly and fully before our minds. To reach the solution of it, in so far as we can reach it, we must fall back on the second method of inquiry which, at the outset, I propose to employ. We must apply *the comparative method* to the history and character of Balaam; we must place him beside other prophets as faulty and sinful as himself, and in whom the elements were as strangely mixed as they were in him: we must endeavour to *classify* him, and to read the problem of his life in the light of that of men of his own order and type.

Yet that is by no means easy to do without putting him to a grave disadvantage. For the only prophets with whom we can compare him are the Hebrew prophets; and Balaam was not a Hebrew; he was not bound, and therefore he must not be judged, by their law; he had no part in the special election and grace vouchsafed to them. And, again, it is not easy for us to judge even *them* fairly. They were men of another race and an inferior dispensation to ours; they are separated from us by the lapse of long centuries; the conditions of their life were different from those with which we are familiar; and all this adds immensely to our difficulty in framing any just estimate of them. We should be guilty of a monstrous injustice were we to apply the standards of to-day even to the English statesmen and men of letters of a hundred to a hundred and fifty years ago; to Fox, Chatham, Walpole, not to mention such creatures as the Duke of Newcastle and Lord Bute; to Dr Johnson, Steele, Goldsmith, Addison, Pope, Swift, and still more to the poor wits and scholars of Grub Street and the Dunciad. But how much more monstrous would be the injustice of applying the only standards with which we are thoroughly familiar to the Oriental statesmen and prophets of from two to four thousand years ago? Throughout our endeavour to form an estimate of Balaam's character, then, we must, if we would be

just to him, make large allowance for the inevitable and immense differences of race, condition, custom, and age, which divide him from us; while even in our comparison of him with Hebrew prophets we must make still further allowance for the fact that he was not of the seed of Abraham, and possessed none of those advantages of the Jew over the Gentile by which St Paul affirms[1] that the former was benefited "much every way."

It has been the fashion to speak of Balaam as combining in himself, to a rare and unexampled, if not to an impossible, degree, functions, qualities, and impulses the most contradictory and opposed. Nevertheless, while admitting that few men have combined in a single nature so many different and opposed characteristics, I am prepared, not to affirm only, but to demonstrate, that we find in him no contradictory qualities save such as may be found in other prophets of the Old Testament, and, I might almost say, none but such as are common to man.

1. One of the first combinations by which the student of Balaam's career is startled and perplexed is, that one and the same man should be "a diviner, seeking omens and auguries, and interpreting them after the approved methods of the ancient East, and yet a prophet who heard the words of God and saw

[1] Romans iii. 1, 2.

visions from the Almighty; a soothsayer, affecting to forecast, if not to control, human destinies, and yet a seer familiar with the ecstasies of the prophetic trance, to whom the inspiration of the Almighty gave understanding of things to be."[1] Yet a thousand years after his time Micah affirms[2] not only that the recognised prophets of Israel exercised the arts of soothsaying and divination, but even that these prophets "divined *for money*,"—the very sin charged upon Balaam,—while yet "they leaned upon Jehovah, and said, Is not Jehovah with us? No evil can fall upon us." Nor, strange as it may seem, is it hard to see how these two functions came to be conjoined; how what we should call Religion and Superstition came to be blended in a single mind.

The soothsayer, the diviner, was not *then* the impostor he has now become. In those early ages he was sincerely convinced that the will of God was disclosed in omens and auguries; in the flight of birds, for example, as they rose to the right hand or the left, in the movements and conjunctions of the planets, in the falling of the lot, in the state of the sacred entrails of beasts offered in sacrifice, in the intuitions of the thoughtful and forecasting mind, in portents, in dreams, and in the unwonted ecstasies of sensitive and

[1] See page 1.

[2] Micah iii. 7, 11.

holy souls.[1] Conscious of the unity of the universe, observing how all things play into each other and form parts of a connected whole—like the alchymists and wizards of the Middle Ages, he believed that the fates of men and of nations might be read in these and similar omens by those who had acquired the art of interpreting them. The sagacity of birds and beasts, for instance, their quick sense of approaching changes in the physical world, naturally led him to infer that, from their cries and motions, dumb yet speaking hints might be collected of every kind of change that was at hand, and to attribute to them a certain prescience even in human affairs. And if by the study of these ominous phenomena the diviner could foresee things to come, why might he not also advise courses of action by which the blows of adverse change might be evaded, and those who consulted him might put themselves in a posture to benefit by vicissitudes which, to the uninstructed, would bring only sorrow and fear and loss? Why might he not thus in some measure control events as well as foresee them, shape as well as forecast the future; and by persuading men to adapt themselves to the will of God, secure for them the blessing of his favour, a

[1] "Astrology was the only form in which the ancients could give 'scientific' shape to their belief that terrestial life is governed by cosmical conditions."—SIM COX.

heart unvexed by fear of change, a heart made bold and confident by the sense of being at one with Him, admitted to the secrets of his counsel, familiar with the determinations of his providence ?

If, in addition to this devout belief in omens as indicative of the Divine Will, we remember that the man who was prophet as well as diviner made it "the chief business and market of his time" and studies to discover the moral principles by which the world is governed, and cherished a steadfast and growing belief in the ultimate victory of those principles, let appearances contradict it as they would, we shall no longer wonder that to a diviner such as Balaam, to a man thus devoutly seeking to acquaint himself with the will of God, God should at times reveal his will in dreams, in visions, in thoughts and words clothed with an authority which convinced him that they were the immediate gift of Heaven. To whom *should* the God of all wisdom speak if not to these earnest seekers after the highest wisdom ? To whom should He reveal his righteous will if not to these ardent lovers of righteousness ?

To us, indeed, who no longer look, and no longer need to look, for intimations of his will, to dream or oracle or seer, it may be easy to denounce this faith in omens and auguries as rank folly and superstition ; but before we brand Balaam as superstitious, before,

at least, we condemn him for his superstition, let us remember that even to-day it is hard to find any man of Eastern race who does not blend this faith in omens, in auspicious and sinister signs and influences, with his religion, however pure and simple his religion may be. Let us remember that there are few even of the Western races, however long they may have held the Christian faith, who do not cherish the same superstition, often in grosser forms than he, as we have only to travel in Italy or Spain to discover. Let us remember that even here in England, the very focus of civilization and Christianity as we esteem it, whole classes are imbued with it, that hardly any class is wholly free from it; that our sailors still have their lucky and unlucky days; that our peasants and maidservants still consult the wise women or the fortune-teller; and that even among those who hold themselves too wise to need the aid of Religion there are at least some who are the dupes of the mesmerist and the spiritualist, or who pet and dandle some private superstition of their own. Or, if we would learn once for all that the most sincere and earnest piety is not incompatible with the superstition of divination, let us remember that John Wesley, one of the most sensible and practical as well as one of the most devout of men, "the first to reject what was extravagant, the last to adopt what was new," used to guide his conduct, whether

in the ordinary events or in the great crises of his life, by drawing lots, or by watching the particular texts at which his Bible fell open.[1]

With these facts well in mind, we shall be in no haste to conclude that Balaam was an impostor, or even that he was without true religion and piety, because he sought to ascertain the will of God by the study of omens and portents; nor shall we pronounce him unworthy to be a prophet, and to receive words and visions from the Almighty, simply because he was versed in the arts of divination, arts too, be it remembered, the inferiority of which he was forward to acknowledge the very moment he recognized it.[2]

Nor is it in the least difficult to adduce a case parallel to his even from the goodly fellowship of the Hebrew prophets. The character of Saul, the first king of Israel, presents us with a problem as profound and perplexing as that of Balaam himself—a problem of which our great poet Browning has given us so admirable a study that I have often wondered why he has not made the Prophet of Pethor the hero of one of his poems. For Saul was not chosen to be King simply because of the beauty of his person, or because of his superior stature. There were rare capacities, royal gifts, "in the choice young man and goodly"

[1] Green's "Short History of the English People," chap. x.

[2] See comment on Numbers xxiii. 23.

whom Samuel anointed to be "ruler over the Lord's inheritance;" capacities for the highest spiritual, as well as for the highest political and military functions. And once at least we know that he too saw visions from the Almighty, and heard words from the Most High. While the royal chrism was still fresh upon him, when he turned his back to go from Samuel, as he went down the hill to Gibeah, "behold, a company of prophets met him, *and the Spirit of God came upon him,*" as it came upon Balaam,[1] "*and he prophesied among them.*" For a time he rose into his truest and highest self. God gave him another heart, and he became a new man.[2] Yet what was his after life but a long rebellion against the God who had thus exalted him, until the Spirit of the Lord departed from him, and an evil spirit troubled him?[3] How low must *he* have fallen, how far from all righteousness, who, after having known Samuel, the grave and reverend founder of the schools of the prophets, and after having himself received inspirations from on high which quickened him to ecstasy, stooped to the meanest, the most venal and imposture-ridden, form of divination—a form so base and mercenary that he himself had forbidden it on pain of death—and consulted the witch of Endor, a poor wretch who fooled and plundered rustics by her spells and incanta-

[1] Num. xxiv. 2. [2] 1 Sam. x. 1-13. [3] *Ibid.* xvi. 14

tions, her mock apparitions, her ventriloquial illusions! Yet, who that reads David's "Song of the Bow," his elegy over the fallen king, can doubt the original greatness of the man, or pronounce him a wholly unworthy organ of the Divine Spirit? But if Saul were a prophet, why not Balaam?

2. A second anomaly in the character of Balaam by which we are staggered and perplexed is, that he should be at once a good man and a bad: "a man of God who, in the face of all threatening and allurement, professed that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord his God, to do a small thing or a great, and who, in the teeth of his own most clamorous interests and desires did consistently speak the words that God put into his mouth; and yet a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord," who sought to evade the duty with which he was charged, and, while faithful to the letter of the Divine command, was unfaithful to its intention and spirit.[1] And yet the very words in which I have stated this anomaly remind us of the unnamed Hebrew prophet[2] who, in

[1] See pages 1, 2.

[2] 1 Kings xiii. Any one who reads this Chapter attentively will find many points of close similarity between the history of this Prophet and that of Balaam, in his bearing before the hostile king, in the predictions he uttered, in the very terms in which he refused the reward offered him by Jeroboam, in his temptation and fall; while in the contemptible old prophet who lied unto his "brother," and betrayed him to his death, he will recognise a far worse man

the days of Jeroboam, cried out against the altar at Bethel: for he too delivered the message which God had put into his mouth with the most splendid fidelity, risking his very life, and yet could not be true to the charge, "Eat no bread (in Bethel), nor drink water," and lost his life, not by his fidelity to the Divine command, but by his infidelity to it. It is he, and not Balaam, who was originally described as "*a man of God who was disobedient to the word of the Lord.*"

And if Balaam is to be condemned as a sinner above all men because, though he saw visions and heard words from God, he nevertheless wanted to curse the people he was bound to bless, and studied how he might evade the spirit of the injunction he had received from the Most High, what are we to say to Jonah who first tried to flee from the presence of the Lord rather than deliver the warning to Nineveh with which he was charged, and then was "very angry" with God because He did not destroy "that great city in which were more than six score thousand little children, and also much cattle," and who seems to have thought less of the destruction of that vast multitude of living men than of that of the quick-springing gourd which sheltered his head from the heat of the sun? Was not this a prophet of like passions with

than the son of Beor. Such a reader will do well to peruse also the sequel of this strange story in 2 Kings xxiii. 15-20.

the other, as mean and selfish, but not as great, although the son of Amittai was a Hebrew, and lived in the light of a period nearly a thousand years subsequent to that of Balaam?

Nay, more: are Balaam and Jonah the only two men, or even the only two good men, who, while seeing and approving the better course, have taken the worse; who have left the path of righteousness to fall into the pit of transgression? Do none of *us* ever attempt to evade the pressure of unwelcome duties and commands, and seek how to take our own way and to gratify our own desires without altogether breaking with God and his law? Is even that special device of keeping a command in the letter, yet violating it in the spirit, wholly unknown in what we justly call "the religious *world*," since its denizens are at least as worldly as they are religious, and may be equally sincere both in their worldliness and their religion? We have only to recall men whom we ourselves have known to find many parallels to that combination of good with evil qualities which we have observed in Balaam; we have only to examine our own hearts to find a key to the anomaly which perplexes us in him.

3. But let us pass from these general considerations, and take up the two specific sins with which Balaam is charged, the two special anomalies which have made

him an enigma to us; and see, here again, whether we cannot classify him, whether we cannot match him with other prophets as favoured and yet as faulty as himself; whether even we cannot find in ourselves the very complexities which puzzle us in him.

One of the sins brought home to him with extraordinary force and bitterness in the New Testament Scriptures is his venality. And it is impossible to study his career, and to note his ardent love and admiration of righteousness, yet not be struck with surprise and shame at discovering that he loved the wages of unrighteousness, and was capable of prostituting his rare and eminent gifts for hire. Still, do we not find this same strange and pitiful combination of piety and covetousness in Jacob, who was surnamed Israel, "the Prince with God," and from whom the whole seed of Abraham have derived their name, and perhaps something more than their *name?* No candid student of his history can deny that, even from the first, Jacob shewed a singular appreciation of spiritual things, a singular ambition for spiritual primacy and honour. Nor can any man who accepts the Bible record of him doubt that dreams and visions of the most ravishing beauty, pregnant with the most profound spiritual intention and promise, were vouchsafed him; or that, at least when he blessed his sons from his dying bed, his eyes were opened to behold

things that were to befall them and their children years and centuries after he himself had been gathered to his fathers. Even the oracles of Balaam do not surpass the long series of dooms and benedictions which Jacob was then moved to utter.[1] Yet what was his whole life but, on the one side, a constant endeavour to enrich or secure himself at the cost of others, by superior craft or superior force; and, on the other side, a Divine discipline by which that worldly and grasping spirit was chastened out of him, in order that his genius for religion might have free play?

And, again, who can deny that this love of money, this covetousness which is idolatry, this selfish and grasping spirit, is of all sins that which always has been, and is, most common and prevalent in the Church, and even among sincerely religious men? It clothes itself with respectability as with a garment, and walks often unrebuked, often flattered even and admired, in almost every assembly of the saints. How many of *us* are there who, if we love righteousness, also hanker after the wages of unrighteousness, after the opulence, the gratifications, the success which can only come to us through a selfish and worldly, *i.e.*, a sinful life! No transgression is more common than this among spiritual men, though none is more fatal

[1] Genesis xlix.

to the spiritual life, since none renders a man more impervious to the rebukes of conscience or the warnings of the Word and Spirit of God.

Or take that other and grosser crime which we have seen brought home to Balaam, the sensuality that made the foul device by which the early innocence of Israel was debauched, familiar, or at best not impossible to him. Is it difficult to find a parallel to that? It would not be fair, though many would think it fair, to cite the example of David's well-known sin; for no sin was ever more deeply repented than his, as few have been more terribly avenged. But think of Solomon; think of the beauty and promise of his youth. Recall his choice of a wise and understanding heart above all the luxuries of wealth and all the flatteries of power. Read his wonderful prayer when he dedicated himself and all the resources of his kingdom to the service of Jehovah, and invoked a blessing on all who at any time and from any place should turn to the Temple and call on the name of the Lord. And then remember that this most religious king, this great prophet who "spake three thousand proverbs and whose psalms were a thousand and five,"[1] to whose heart God gave a largeness like that of the sea,[2] sank into the very sin of sensual idolatry with which Balaam betrayed Israel, suffering

[1] 1 Kings iv. 32. [2] *Ibid.* iv. 29.

his wives and concubines to turn away his heart from the Lord his God, till at last he fell from his harem into his grave, an unloved tyrant, a jaded voluptuary, and probably a believer whose faith was shot through and through with a pessimistic scepticism.

Nor is this craving for sensual indulgence one of those defunct sins against which we need no longer strive. After covetousness, in its more or less pronounced forms, no sin is more common than this even in the Church; though this, not being a respectable sin, cannot be carried to such lengths or be so openly pursued.[1]

These, indeed, are the two sins against which we are most constantly warned in the New Testament; and it is both curious and instructive to mark that between these two sins the writers of the New Testament see an occult connection, as if they were close neighbours, however far they may seem to stand apart, twin transgressions, although they wear so little likeness to each other. St Paul ranks the sensual and the covetous in the same category more than once,[2] and

[1] It is curious to note that even in the first uninspired homily of which we have any record, the so-called "Second Epistle of Clement," the church of Corinth (in the second century) is rebuked for so "holding the essential sinfulness of matter as to deny the resurrection of the body, *and to minimise the sinfulness of fleshly lusts.*" And no one can have forgotten the severity with which St Paul rebuked their fathers for the selfsame sin.

[2] 1 Cor. v. 10, and vi. 9.

hardly ever warns us against uncleanness without immediately adding a warning against covetousness;[1] and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews,[2] after bidding us honour the bed undefiled, instantly adds, "Be ye free from the love of money, content with such things as ye have." But if there be this occult connection between these two forms of self-pleasing, we need not be surprised to find both in the man in whom we find one of them; while, if even Solomon, to whom "the Lord had appeared twice," commanding him "concerning this very thing, that he should not go after other gods,"[3] nevertheless suffered many strange women to turn away his heart after many strange gods, we cannot much wonder that in a far ruder age, and under far less pure and happy conditions, Balaam did not keep himself unspotted by this transgression.

I am not unaware that we rarely find so many anomalies, so many "jarring contrasts of incompatible qualities" in a single character as we have discovered in that of Balaam; nor do I wish to forget that we have had to look in many quarters to discover cases parallel with his. It is no part of my duty, or of my aim, either to make light of his transgressions, or to contend that there is no problem to solve before we

[1] Eph. v. 3; Col. iii. 5. [2] Heb. xiii. 4, 5.
[3] 1 Kings xi. 9, 10.

can frame any reasonable estimate of the man. That a man so great in virtues and gifts should fall into vices so vulgar and glaring must always, I hope, remain in some measure a mystery to us. But I submit that in thus comparing him with Jacob and Solomon, with Saul and Jonah, we do, to a large extent, discover the class to which he belongs, and reduce our problem to more practicable dimensions. For these too were men of rare and eminent gifts, gifts which, as Browning says, "a man may waste, desecrate, yet never quite lose;" they were men chosen by God for distinguished and honourable service, men who were moved, taught, and chastened by his wise and holy Spirit; and yet, among them, they display the very vices and disgrace themselves by the very transgressions which we recognize and deplore in him.[1] And taking him for all in all, remembering and making due allowance for his age, his blood, his breeding, his temptations, I for one should hesitate to pronounce him a worse man on the whole than Saul, or Solomon, or Jonah. They had

[1] "Is there not reason to doubt whether a natural predisposition to the cardinal virtues is the best outfit for the prophet, the artist, or even the preacher? Saints from of old have been more readily made out of publicans and sinners than out of Pharisees, who pay tithes of all they possess. The artist, the writer, and even the philosopher, equally need passion to do great work; and genuine passion is ever apt to be unruly, though by stronger men eventually subdued."—Morison's "Macaulay," p. 57.

advantages denied to him. He had disadvantages—defects of will and taints of blood, a bias of hereditary habit, a license of custom, a force of temptation—unknown to them. If God could use and inspire *them*, why should He not call and inspire *him*? If God could make large allowance for them, and chasten them from their sins, and make their hearts perfect with Him before all was done, why should Balaam be "cast as rubbish to the void"? Why may not the same just and merciful God have long since clothed him in the righteousness which he loved and desired, chastening him, in this world and in the next, from the taints which marred a character in much so high and noble, and not suffering a soul so capable and precious to perish everlastingly?

To the ordinary reader of the Bible, who has not carefully observed how graciously, and for what high ends, God condescends to use even the most imperfect and unlikely instruments, the main difficulty of this narrative springs, I suppose, from the fact that the pure Spirit of God came upon and possessed a man in whom there was so much that was impure, opening his eyes on visions so far-reaching, quickening in him powers so rare, and lifting him to the conception of a moral ideal so lofty. They can understand that, as we read in the Book of Wisdom (vii. 27), "Wisdom in all ages, entering into *holy* souls, maketh friends of

God and prophets;" but they are staggered at the thought that this holy and divine Wisdom should enter into souls *not* holy, or even unholy. That difficulty has been in great part removed, I trust, by the cases I have already cited. But that it may be removed altogether, that it may be made clear and indubitable that God does deign to employ and inspire men far worse than Balaam, it may be worth while to refer to the gifts conferred upon the members of the Corinthian Church in Apostolic times, and to cite an instance which will put an end to all doubt.

The Corinthian converts were not by any means the pure and sinless persons we are apt to imagine all the members of the primitive Church to have been. They indulged themselves in a license which St Paul had to rebuke with unsparing severity, admitting to their fellowship licentious and covetous men,[1] wrangling about meats, shewing off their gifts in church with emulous vanity, pouncing greedily on the food spread on their common table, capable even of being "drunken" at the supper of the Lord.[2] And yet St Paul says of them[3] that, when they came together, every one of them had a psalm, or a teaching, or a revelation, or a tongue, or an interpretation; and implies that they possessed among them all the gifts of the Spirit,—words of wisdom and knowledge, in-

[1] 1 Cor. v. 11; vi. 15-20. [2] 1 Cor. xi. 21. [3] *Ibid.* xiv. 26.

spirations of truth, the faith which removes mountains, power to heal, power to rule, power to work miracles, power to prophesy.[1]

Yet even this is nothing as compared with the case of Caiaphas, the High Priest. It is almost impossible to conceive a worse man than the bad bold ecclesiastic who wore the robes of Aaron and sat in Moses' chair. It is on him mainly that we must lay the guilt of the Crucifixion, of the death of Him who knew no sin but went about doing good. And yet when this bad bold priest stood up in the hesitating Sanhedrin, and said, with a scorn he took no pains to conceal: "Ye know nothing at all, nor consider that it is expedient that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not"; we are expressly told: "And this spake he not of himself, but being high priest that year, he *prophesied*,—prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation, and not for that nation only, but that he might also gather into one the children of God who were scattered abroad."[2] So that the divinest prophecy of all time fell from lips as foul as any that ever breathed!

And why should we marvel at this grace and condescension as at some strange thing? We should rather take comfort from it and hope. Does not the Spirit of God strive with the spirit of every man,

[1] 1 Cor. xii. 10. [2] John xi. 49-52.

however guilty and depraved he may be, quickening in him pure memories and aspirations, gracious impulses and motions, seeking by all means to redeem him to the love and pursuit of righteousness? What hope would there be for us, what hope for the world, if God put his pure Word and his cleansing Spirit only into hearts already clean? Would his Word dwell in *our* hearts, or his Spirit abide with *us?* Instead of marvelling at the grace shewn to Balaam, and to men even more sinful than he, it behoves us rather to adore that grace, and to draw from it the inspiration of a hope that He who sitteth above the heavens, and in whose sight even the heavens are not pure, will come down and dwell in us if only, despite our manifold offences against Him, we are of a humble and a contrite spirit.

It might well seem as if it were impossible to carry our argument further; but there is still another stage to which we must pursue it, and that perhaps the most satisfactory and conclusive of all. For all the men who have hitherto been cited — Jacob, Saul, Solomon, Jonah—belong to a dubious class; there is not one of them whose character and fate have not been long and often disputed. I myself have heard it gravely discussed from the pulpit whether it were possible to entertain any hope of Solomon's ultimate

salvation; and few of the "evangelical" clergy would hesitate, I suppose, to pronounce a damnatory verdict on Saul, although he was a king: Jacob is condemned every day by every bluff John Bull who prides himself, not always with sufficient reason, on his honesty and straightforwardness; and Jonah, who was perhaps as irritable as poets are said to be, is set down as but a sorry and peevish specimen of the prophetic race, to whom judgment may have long since been meted out in the very measure in which he himself meted it to others. I do not hold with these verdicts. Those who do hold with them seem to me to be singularly destitute of the historical spirit, and still more strangely forgetful of what they themselves are like. But they are common verdicts. And to me it appears that our argument would gain much in force if, instead of disputing these verdicts, we were to consider the examples of men who are universally recognized as good and great, but who, nevertheless, had to endure that very conflict between the good and evil qualities of their nature which we have marked in Balaam. They may have conquered, and he may have been defeated in the strife; but, none the less, if that strife was obviously waged in their hearts, waged so strenuously and bitterly and long that even to them the issue of the conflict must often have seemed uncertain, we cannot be amazed that this

heathen diviner should have been torn by it, or even that he should have succumbed to the powers of evil; he cannot any longer seem to us either an impossible monster or an insoluble enigma.

And it is only too easy to adduce such examples. I suspect, indeed I am sure, that, if only we could read their inner history, we should find that all the best men who have ever breathed, save only He who was more than man, were agitated, and often all but overthrown, in this inward war. Few men are more generally recognized as heroically good and great, and none, I suppose, has been favoured with a greater abundance of the visions and revelations which have altered the face and the heart of the world, than St Peter and St Paul. Yet not only did these two chiefest apostles share in the agony of this mysterious conflict, but in their history we can trace its main crises, and note how it extended to the very close of their career.

Take, first, the case of St Peter. Was not he a man of two minds, and therefore unstable in his ways—unfaithful to the Word with which he was charged, and to the Spirit that inspired and sanctified him? The story of that fall, in which one of the boldest of men played the coward, one of the truest turned false, one of the best plunged into an almost incredible sin, is too well known to need comment. And yet who

would not hesitate to say that Balaam sinned more heinously when, against the clear dictate of conscience, and the direct command of God, he tempted Israel into the licentious idolatries of Midian, than did the Apostle who, in the hour of his Master's utmost need, denied all knowledge of Him, all concern in Him, with oaths and curses.

"Yes," it may be said, "but Peter bitterly repented and nobly retrieved that sin. When once it was forgiven him, he became a new man, unfaltering in his loyalty to Christ, steadfast as the Rock after which he was named. You never catch him tripping again, never find him untrue to the Spirit of Christ when once that Spirit had descended upon him at Pentecost." *That,* I know, is the common impression of him, and is often heard from men who profess to be students of the New Testament,—to the mere amazement of all who really study it. For not only has this conception of St Peter no warrant in the New Testament Scriptures; it is absolutely contradicted by them. Many years after Pentecost, St Peter sinned against the Holy Ghost as heinously as he had before sinned against the Son of Man. By an express and immediate vision from Heaven, he had been taught to call no man, whether Gentile or Jew, common and unclean. Obedient to the heavenly vision, he had preached the Gospel to Cornelius the centurion, and

admitted him, uncircumcised, into the Church. He had even persuaded the Christian Jews at Jerusalem to grant this liberty to all their non-Jewish brethren. And yet more than fifteen years after Pentecost, when he came to Antioch, though at first he entered into full brotherly communion with the Gentile converts of that city, afterward, when certain men came from Jerusalem with whom he wished to stand well, "he drew back and separated himself" from them, "fearing them that were of the circumcision." St Paul had to withstand him to the face; to tell him that he stood self-condemned: and even to launch at this inspired Apostle the tremendous charge of "hypocrisy," which our Version mercifully modulates into "dissimulation."[1]

Could we have any clearer proof than this that St Peter was still a man of two minds, still capable of betraying the cause of his Master and of sinning against the Spirit of all truth and holiness? that the brave man might still play the coward, and fear men more than God? There may be no truth in the legend which relates how, to escape the persecution of Nero, St Peter fled from Rome, but had hardly got beyond the Gate when he met the Lord carrying his cross, and asked Him, "Lord, whither goest Thou?" and that Jesus replied, "I go to Rome, to be crucified

[1] Gal. ii. 11-14.

again, for thee." Whereupon the Apostle returned to Rome, was seized, tried, condemned to the cross; but, at his own request, was crucified head downwards, because he held himself unworthy to die in the same manner as the Lord. But if the legend be not true, it is well invented; it is characteristic of the man, of the cowardice with which his ardent courage was streaked, of the noble humility and devotion with which he retrieved the errors into which he fell. The legend may not be true; but the story of his "hypocrisy" at Antioch, of his sin against the Spirit by whom he was inspired, of his disobedience to the revelation vouchsafed him, *is* true past all doubt. And that being so, how can we accept Balaam's disobedience, his sin against the Spirit which came upon him, as fatal to all claim to a sincere goodness?

Take, secondly, the case of St Paul. The seventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, which was written when he was nearly sixty years of age, when therefore he had been a Christian and an Apostle some twenty years, has always been read in an autobiographical sense: *i.e.*, it has been assumed that in this Chapter St Paul generalized the fact of his own spiritual experience. Nor do I see how it can be read in any other sense when we remember the constant allusions which he makes to an inward conflict in him-

self resembling that depicted here. For here he tells us only a little more at large what he elsewhere confesses again and again: viz., that within the narrow continent of his single being he found two laws, two minds, two men at strife, insomuch that he could not do the good he would, but the evil which he would not that he did; and groans, a wretched captive, to be delivered from the body of this death. And it is not a little remarkable that St Paul, of all men, should have been conscious of this terrible struggle, and should have depicted it more fully and more pathetically than any other of the Apostles; for as we study his life, though we constantly detect the signs of this struggle in it, even the eyes of malice can detect no proof that he at any time yielded to the inferior law, mind, or man which he recognized in himself. If, as he confesses, he did the evil he hated, yet which of us has discovered any evil in him, albeit the workings of that mighty and passionate spirit are laid bare to us with an unparalleled frankness, and we know *him* more intimately than we know any of our neighbours? Yet he knew himself even better than we know him; and if he was conscious of this internecine war in which he was perpetually being worsted and "brought into captivity to the law of sin," how can we possibly doubt that God may inspire and employ in his service men in whom the spirits of good

and ill wage a constant strife? How can we possibly deny that there may have been much that was genuinely good in Balaam, although there was much also that was unquestionably evil?

By another autobiographical confession of about the same date, though it refers to an earlier period in his history, St Paul enables us to run the parallel closer still. In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians he tells us that, fourteen years before he wrote to them, he was caught up into the third heaven, into Paradise, where he saw visions so glorious, and heard such "unwordable words," that, in his ecstasy, he could not be sure whether he was in the body or out of it. But, he goes on to say that, lest he should be overmuch lifted up by the exceeding greatness of these revelations, there was given him a stake in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to buffet him. So intolerable was the agony of this trial, that he thrice besought the Lord that it might depart from him. Yet it did not depart. He had to rest, and he was able not to rest only but to rejoice, in the assurance, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for strength is made perfect in weakness."[1] It is impossible for us to read these verses without being reminded of the abundance of visions and revelations vouchsafed to Balaam, and of the well-nigh unutterable words he heard from the Almighty,[2] and of the danger of being lifted up by

[1] 2 Cor. xii. 1-10. [2] See especially Num. xxiv. 15-24.

them, in which, as we have seen, he stood,[1]—his exposure to the assaults of an evil spirit when the Spirit of God departed from him. And if *he* fell in the strife in which St Paul overcame, if the grace conceded to him did not prove sufficient for him, if in his case strength, so far from being made perfect, was lost in weakness, still it behoves us to remember the immense disadvantage at which he stood as compared with the Apostle of the Gentiles: for then we shall frankly admit that his position was most perilous—a position in which even St Paul himself might have fallen; we shall confess that there may have been much that was good in the man, although he succumbed to, instead of defeating, the messenger of Satan sent to buffet him. His very elation at being so highly favoured among men may have contributed to his fall; and the abundance of his revelations may have lifted him up only to cast him down.

On the whole, then, I think we may claim to have classified our Prophet—to have brought him within the recognized limits of humanity. We have found similar combinations of contradictory qualities in seers of whom we have a right to expect more than from him—in Jacob, in Saul, in Solomon, in Jonah—but who succumbed to the selfsame temptations before which he fell; while even in St Peter and St Paul we

[1] See comments on Num. xxiv. 3, 4, and 15, 16.

have seen the very conflict between good and evil in which he was engaged, although, by the grace of God, they overcame in that inward strife in which he was overthrown. And hence we cannot admit that he lies beyond either the limits of our humanity or the pale of our sympathies. He was a man of like passions with us, spirit of our spirit as well as flesh of our flesh, though he was at once greater and baser, better and worse, than most of us. We recognize our own image and likeness in him, though in him its lines are both larger and darker than they are in us; and we can hail him as a comrade in the war in which we too are enlisted, although we have to sigh over him as he lies defeated, and in some measure disgraced, upon the field which we still occupy. He is not altogether unworthy a place in our ranks, or even of the great Captain of our warfare. He did valiant service once, and stood with splendid fidelity in a post of honour and of danger which many of us might have deserted. And if at last he proved a recreant and a traitor, we must not forget either the noble service he once rendered, or that he was not drilled and led and sustained as we are now. If *we* should prove faithful to the last, it will not be because we are better and braver than he, but because we come of a purer strain, or have enjoyed a more auspicious training, or have received a more sufficient grace. And hence we may

look back on him with pity, not unmixed with admiration, if it be also touched with shame and regret.

Lest, however, in thus classifying Balaam I should suggest to some of my readers a far larger and more difficult problem than that of his personal character, it may be well to add a few words—and they shall be very few—on a question which is sure to present itself, sooner or later, to every thoughtful mind. The question, which looks very difficult and perplexing at first, is this: How comes it to pass that God should have selected for special gifts and special service men who were capable and guilty of such heinous faults and crimes as Jacob, Saul, David, Solomon, Jonah, and even Peter himself? Difficult as the question seems, the answer to it is very simple, very obvious, and springs straight from facts with which we are all familiar. For, obviously, no man has ever told widely and deeply on the world in whose nature there was not a certain largeness, force, volume. Men conspicuous for energy, capacity, power, are the only instruments by which God can move and raise the great mass of their fellows. But is it not human to err? Are not even the best men still human? And if great men err, will they not err greatly, and shew the same force of character when they do evil that

they bring to the doing of that which is good? If, then, God elects for the service of the world the only men who are able to serve it, must He not inevitably choose men who, when they sin, will sin heinously and conspicuously, and who can be chastened from their sin only by the heavier strokes of his rod, only by the sharper and more steadfast discipline of his providence?

It only remains that we gather up and lay to heart the lesson of this great yet wasted life,—a life not wholly wasted, however, if it serve to teach us and our fellows lessons of wisdom and humility, and help to make us more faithful in few things than Balaam was in many. For though *we* see no vision and utter no oracle, we lie open to his temptations, and may fall into his sins. We may combine his love of righteousness with his hankering after the wages of unrighteousness, or his admiration of holiness with his unclean addiction to sins of the flesh. We *must* be in danger of falling into these sins, despite our piety, or we should not be so often and gravely warned against them.

Many lessons are suggested by this narrative, and at some of them we have already glanced; but none springs from it so directly as this warning against that combination of covetousness or sensuality with religion

of which even the Church has yielded so many examples. This was the warning which Bishop Butler drew from the story of Balaam and which was in his mind when, in his measured and weighty phraseology, he affirmed that it is impossible to justify men's "so strong attachment to this present world. Our hopes and fears and pursuits are in degrees beyond all proportion to the known value of the things they respect." And, as he reminds us, there are many to whom this excessive addiction to the gains and gratifications of the present time would be impossible did they not beguile their conscience with religious equivocations, subterfuges, palliations, and partial regards to duty, like those of Balaam. Like him, they are apt to protest too much, and to do too little; to boast of the fidelity with which they meet some part of the demands which God makes upon them—their scrupulous observance of the Sabbath to wit; or their devotion to the worship and sacraments of the Church, their diligence in reading the Bible, the orthodoxy of their belief, or even their breadth of thought, their wide toleration, their superiority to creeds and forms; while yet they neglect the weightier matters of the law, and do not make it their chief and ruling aim to do justice, to shew mercy, and to walk in a constant dependence and fellowship with God.

They will not openly rebel against Him. Oh, no! But "they are for making a composition with the Almighty." *These* commands which jump with their inclinations, or which do not too severely cross their inclinations, they will sedulously observe. "But as to others; why, they will make all the atonements in their power; the ambitious, the covetous, the dissolute man, each in a way which shall not contradict his respective pursuit;" but they will not wholly renounce the special sin they have a mind to, or, at best, they will not give it up at once, but wait for a more convenient season.

Yet herein, he continues, they stand self-condemned, like Peter at Antioch. For no man is so bad but that "after having had the pleasure or the advantage of a vicious action"—or course of action—"he would choose to be free from the guilt of it," and die the death of the righteous, even if he has not been at the pains to live their life. And this of itself "shews a disturbance and an implicit dissatisfaction in vice. If we inquire into the grounds of it, we shall find that it proceeds partly from an immediate sense of having done evil, and partly from an impression that this inward sense will, one time or another, be seconded by a higher judgment, upon which our whole being depends." It is to quell or allay this inward dissatisfaction that men palter and equivocate with them-

selves, and would fain persuade themselves that they may atone for moral delinquencies by attention to religious duties; forgetting that religion itself is but a means to which a pure and complete morality is the end.

This is, substantially, the lesson which one of the sagest of Englishmen, who had carefully studied the character of Balaam, drew from the story before us. Nor do I see how we are to improve upon it. It is the true moral of our narrative, and only needs such modification as we may each make for himself, to come home to every man's experience and conscience and heart.

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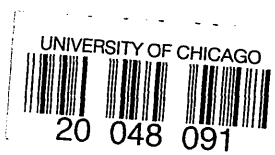

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